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VIXEN

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. III

LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

1879

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CONTENTS TO VOL. III.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	GOING INTO EXILE...	1
II.	CHIEFLY FINANCIAL	81
III.	"WITH WEARY DAYS THOU SHALT BE CLOTHED AND FED"	106
IV.	LOVE AND ÆSTHETICS	121
V.	CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAVES	148
VI.	A FOOL'S PARADISE	156
VII.	"IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN"	170
VIII.	WEDDING BELLS	198

CHAP.		PAGE
IX.	The nearest Way to Norway	226
X.	"All the Rivers run into the Sea"	291
XI.	The Bluebeard Chamber	304
	Epilogue	318

VIXEN.

CHAPTER I.

GOING INTO EXILE.

After a long sleepless night of tossing to and fro, Vixen rose with the first stir of life in the old house, and made herself ready to face the bleak hard world. Her meditations of the night had brought no new light to her mind. It was very clear to her that she must go away—as far as possible—from her old home. Her banishment was necessary for everybody's sake. For the sake of Rorie, who must behave like a man of honour, and keep his engagement with Lady Mabel, and shut his old playfellow out of his heart. For the sake of Mrs. Winstanley, who could never be happy

while there was discord in her home; and last of all, for Violet herself, who felt that joy and peace had fled from the Abbey House for ever, and that it would be better to be anywhere, in the coldest strangest region of this wide earth, verily friendless and alone among strange faces, than here among friends who were but friends in name, and among scenes that were haunted with the ghosts of dead joys.

She went round the gardens and shrubberies in the early morning, looking sadly at everything, as if she were bidding the trees and flowers a long farewell. The rhododendron thickets were shining with dew, the grassy tracks in that wilderness of verdure were wet and cold under Vixen's feet. She wandered in and out among the groups of wild growing shrubs, rising one above another to the height of forest trees, and then she went out by the old five-barred gate which Titmouse used to jump so merrily, and rambled in the plantation till the sun was high, and the pines began to breathe forth their incense as the day-god warmed them into life.

It was half-past eight. Nine was the hour for breakfast, a meal at which, during the Squire's time, the fragile Pamela had rarely appeared, but which, under the present *régime*, she generally graced with her presence. Captain Winstanley was an early riser, and was not sparing in his contempt for sluggish habits.

Vixen had made up her mind never again to sit at meat with her stepfather; so she went straight to her own den, and told Phœbe to bring her a cup of tea.

"I don't want anything else," she said wearily when the girl suggested a more substantial breakfast; "I should like to see mamma presently. Do you know if she has gone down?"

"No, miss. Mrs. Winstanley is not very well this morning. Pauline has taken her up a cup of tea."

Vixen sat idly by the open window, sipping her tea, and caressing Argus's big head with a listless hand, waiting for the next stroke of fate. She was sorry for her mother, but had no wish to see her. What could they say to each other—they, whose

thoughts and feelings were so wide apart? Presently Phœbe came in with a little three-cornered note, written in pencil.

"Pauline asked me to give you this from your ma, miss."

The note was brief, written in short gasps, with dashes between them.

"I feel too crushed and ill to see you—I have told Conrad what you wish—he is all goodness—he will tell you what we have decided—try to be worthier of his kindness—poor misguided child—he will see you in his study, directly after breakfast—pray control your unhappy temper."

"His study, indeed!" ejaculated Vixen, tearing up the little note and scattering its perfumed fragments on the breeze; "my father's room, which he has usurped. I think I hate him just a little worse in that room than anywhere else—though that would seem hardly possible, when I hate him so cordially everywhere."

She went to her looking-glass, and surveyed

herself proudly as she smoothed her shining hair, resolved that he should see no indication of trouble or contrition in her face. She was very pale, but her tears of last night had left no traces. There was a steadiness in her look that befitted an encounter with an enemy. A message came from the Captain, while she was standing before her glass, tying a crimson ribbon under the collar of her white morning-dress.

Would she please to go to Captain Winstanley in the study? She went without an instant's delay; walked quietly into the room, and stood before him silently as he sat at his desk writing.

"Good-morning, Miss Tempest," he said, looking up at her with his blandest air; "sit down, if you please. I want to have a chat with you."

Vixen seated herself in her father's large crimson morocco chair. She was looking round the room absently, dreamily, quite disregarding the Captain. The dear old room was full of sadly sweet associations. For the moment she forgot the existence of her foe. His cold level tones recalled

her thoughts from the lamented past to the bitter present.

"Your mother informs me that you wish to leave the Abbey House," he began; "and she has empowered me to arrange a suitable home for you elsewhere. I entirely concur in your opinion that your absence from Hampshire for the next year or so will be advantageous to yourself and others. You and Mr. Vawdrey have contrived to get yourselves unpleasantly talked about in the neighbourhood. Any further scandal may possibly be prevented by your departure."

"It is not on that account I wish to leave home," said Vixen proudly. "I am not afraid of scandal. If the people hereabouts are so wicked that they cannot see me riding by the side of an old friend for two or three days running without thinking evil of him and me, I am sorry for them, but I certainly should not regulate my life to please them. The reason I wish to leave the Abbey House is that I am miserable here, and have been ever since you entered it as its master. We may as well deal frankly with each other

in this matter. You confessed last night that you hated me. I acknowledge to-day that I have hated you ever since I first saw you. It was an instinct."

"We need not discuss that," answered the Captain calmly. He had let passion master him last night, but he had himself well in hand to-day. She might be as provoking as she pleased, but she should not provoke him to betray himself as he had done last night. He detested himself for that weak outbreak of passion.

"Have you arranged with my mother for my leaving home?" inquired Vixen.

"Yes, it is all settled."

"Then I'll write at once to Miss McCroke. I know she will leave the people she is with to travel with me."

"Miss McCroke has nothing to do with the question. Your roaming about the world with a superannuated governess would be too preposterous. I am going to take you to Jersey by this evening's boat. I have an aunt living there who has a fine old manor house, and who will be happy to take

charge of you. She is a maiden lady, a woman of superior cultivation, who devotes herself wholly to intellectual pursuits. Her refining influence will be valuable to you. The island is lovely, the climate delicious. You could not be better off than you will be at Les Tourelles."

"I am not going to Jersey, and I am not going to your intellectual aunt," said Vixen resolutely.

"I beg your pardon, you are going, and immediately. Your mother and I have settled the matter between us. You have expressed a wish to leave home, and you will be pleased to go where we think proper. You had better tell Phœbe to pack your trunks. We shall leave here at ten o'clock in the evening. The boat starts from Southampton at midnight."

Vixen felt herself conquered. She had stated her wish, and it was granted; not in the mode and manner she had desired; but perhaps she ought to be grateful for release from a home that had become loathsome to her, and not take objection to details in the scheme of her exile. To go away,

quite away, and immediately, was the grand point. To fly before she saw Rorie again.

"Heaven knows how weak I might be if he were to talk to me again as he talked last night!" she said to herself. "I might not be able to bear it a second time. Oh Rorie, if you knew what it cost me to counsel you wisely, to bid you do your duty; when the vision of a happy life with you was smiling at me all the time, when the warm grasp of your dear hand made my heart thrill with joy, what a heroine you would think me! And yet nobody will ever give me credit for heroism; and I shall be remembered only as a self-willed young woman, who was troublesome to her relations, and had to be sent away from home."

She was thinking this while she sat in her father's chair, deliberating upon the Captain's last speech. She decided presently to yield, and obey her mother and stepfather. After all, what did it matter where she went? That scheme of being happy in Sweden with Miss McCroke was but an idle fancy. In the depths of her inner consciousness Violet Tempest knew that she could be happy

nowhere away from Rorie and the Forest. What did it matter, then, whether she went to Jersey or Kamtchatka, the sandy desert of Gobi or the Mountains of the Moon? In either case exile meant moral death, the complete renunciation of all that had been sweet and precious in her uneventful young life—the shadowy beech-groves; the wandering streams; the heathery upland plains; the deep ferny hollows, where the footsteps of humanity were almost unknown; the cluster of tall trees on the hill-tops, where the herons came sailing home from their flight across Southampton Water; her childhood's companion; her horse; her old servants. Banishment meant a long farewell to all these.

"I suppose I may take my dog with me?" she asked, after a long pause, during which she had wavered between submission and revolt, "and my maid?"

"I see no objection to your taking your dog; though I doubt whether my aunt will care to have a dog of that size prowling about her house. He can have a kennel somewhere, I daresay. You

must learn to do without a maid. Feminine helplessness is going out of fashion; and one would expect an Amazon like you to be independent of lady's-maids and milliners."

"Why don't you state the case in plain English?" cried Vixen scornfully. "If I took Phœbe with me she would cost money. There would be her wages and maintenance to be provided. If I leave her behind, you can dismiss her. You have a fancy for dismissing old servants."

"Had not you better see to the packing of your trunks?" asked Captain Winstanley, ignoring this shaft.

"What is to become of my horse?"

"I think you must resign yourself to leave him to fate and me," replied the Captain coolly; "my aunt may submit to the infliction of your dog, but that she should tolerate a young lady's roaming about the island on a thoroughbred horse would be rather too much to expect from her old-fashioned notions of propriety."

"Besides, even Arion would cost something to

keep," retorted Vixen, "and strict economy is the rule of your life. If you sell him—and, of course, you will do so—please let Lord Mallow have the refusal of him. I think he would buy him, and treat him kindly, for my sake."

"Wouldn't you rather Mr. Vawdrey had him?"

"Yes, if I were free to give him away; but I suppose you would deny my right of property even in the horse my father gave me."

"Well, as the horse was not specified in your father's will, and as all his horses and carriages were left to your mother, I think there cannot be any doubt that Arion is my wife's property."

"Why not say your property? Why give unnatural prominence to a cipher? Do you think I hold my poor mother to blame for any wrong that is done to me, or to others, in this house? No, Captain Winstanley, I have no resentment against my mother. She is a blameless nullity, dressed in the latest fashion?"

"Go and pack your boxes!" cried the Captain angrily. "Do you want to raise the devil that was raised last night? Do you want another con-

flagration? It might be a worse one this time. I have had a night of fever and unrest."

"Am I to blame for that?"

"Yes—you beautiful fury. It was your image kept me awake. I shall sleep sounder when you are out of this house."

"I shall be ready to start at ten o'clock," said Vixen, in a business-like tone which curiously contrasted this sudden gust of passion on the part of her foe, and humiliated him to the dust. He loathed himself for having let her see her power to hurt him.

She left him, and went straight upstairs to her room, and gave Phœbe directions about the packing of her portmanteaux, with no more outward semblance of emotion than she might have shown had she been starting on a round of pleasant visits under the happiest circumstances. The faithful Phœbe began to cry when she heard that Miss Tempest was going away for a long time, and that she was not to go with her; and poor Vixen had to console her maid instead of brooding upon her own griefs.

"Never mind, Phœbe," she said; "it is as hard for me to lose you as it is for you to lose me. I shall never forget what a devoted little thing you have been, and all the muddy habits you have brushed without a murmur. A few years hence I shall be my own mistress, and have plenty of money, and then, wherever I may be, you shall come to me. If you are married you shall be my housekeeper, and your husband shall be my butler, and your children shall run wild about the place, and be made as much of as the litter of young foxes Bates reared in a corner of the stable-yard, when Mr. Vawdrey was at Eton."

"Oh, miss, I don't want no husband nor no children, I only want you for my missus. And when you come of age, will you live here, miss?"

"No, Phœbe. The Abbey House will belong to mamma all her life. Poor mamma! may it be long before the dear old house comes to me. But when I am of age and my own mistress I shall find a place somewhere in the Forest, you may be sure of that, Phœbe."

Phœbe dried her honest tears, and made haste

with the packing, believing that Miss Tempest was leaving home for her own pleasure, and that she, Phœbe, was the only victim of adverse fate.

The day wore on quickly, though it was laden with sorrow. Vixen had a great deal to do in her den; papers to look over, old letters, pen-and-ink sketches, and scribblings of all kinds to destroy, books and photographs to pack. There were certain things she could not leave behind her. Then there was a melancholy hour to spend in the stable, feeding, caressing, and weeping over Arion, who snorted his tenderest snorts, and licked her hands with abject devotion—almost as if he knew they were going to part, Vixen thought.

Last of all came the parting with her mother. Vixen had postponed this with an aching dread of a scene, in which she might perchance lose her temper, and be betrayed into bitter utterances that she would afterwards repent with useless tears. She had spoken the truth to her stepfather when she told him that she held her mother blameless; yet the fact that she had but the smallest share in that mother's heart was cruelly patent to her.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when Pauline came to Violet's room with a message from Mrs. Winstanley. She had been very ill all the morning, Pauline informed Miss Tempest, suffering severely from nervous headache, and obliged to lie in a darkened room. Even now she was barely equal to seeing anyone.

"Then she had better not see me," said Vixen icily; "I can write her a little note to say good-bye. Perhaps it would be just as well. Tell mamma that I will write, Pauline."

Pauline departed with this message, and returned in five minutes with a distressed visage.

"Oh, miss!" she exclaimed, "your message quite upset your poor mamma. She said, 'How could she?' and began to get almost hysterical. And those hysterical fits end in such fearful headaches."

"I will come at once," said Vixen.

Mrs. Winstanley was lying on a sofa near an open window, the Spanish blinds lowered to exclude the afternoon sunshine, the perfume of the gardens floating in upon the soft summer air. A

tiny teapot and cup and saucer on a Japanese tray showed that the invalid had been luxuriating in her favourite stimulant. There were vases of flowers about the room, and an all-pervading perfume and coolness—a charm half sensuous, half æsthetic.

"Violet, how could you send me such a message?" remonstrated the invalid fretfully.

"Dear mamma, I did not want to trouble you. I know how you shrink from all painful things; and you and I could hardly part without pain, as we are parting to-day. Would it not have been better to avoid any farewell?"

"If you had any natural affection, you would never have suggested such a thing."

"Then perhaps I have never had any natural affection," answered Vixen, with subdued bitterness; "or only so small a stock that it ran out early in my life, and left me cold and hard and unloving. I am sorry we are parting like this, mamma. I am still more sorry that you could not spare me a little of the regard which you have bestowed so lavishly upon a stranger."

"Violet, how can you?" sobbed her mother.

"To accuse me of withholding my affection from you, when I have taken such pains with you from your very cradle! I am sure your frocks, from the day you were short-coated, were my constant care; and when you grew a big, lanky girl, who would have looked odious in commonplace clothes, it was my delight to invent picturesque and becoming costumes for you. I have spent hours poring over books of prints, studying Vandyke and Sir Peter Lely, and I have let you wear some of my most valuable lace; and as for indulgence of your whims! Pray when have I ever thwarted you in anything?"

"Forgive me, mamma!" cried Vixen penitently. She divined dimly—even in the midst of that flood of bitter feeling in which her young soul was overwhelmed—that Mrs. Winstanley had been a good mother, according to her lights. The tree had borne such fruit as was natural to its kind. "Pray forgive me! You have been good and kind and indulgent, and we should have gone on happily together to the end of the chapter, if fate had been kinder."

"It's no use your talking of fate in that way, Violet," retorted her mother captiously. "I know you mean Conrad."

"Perhaps I do, mamma; but don't let us talk of him any more. We should never agree about him. You and he can be quite happy when I am gone. Poor, dear, trusting, innocent-minded mamma!" cried Vixen, kneeling by her mother's chair and putting her arms round her ever so tenderly. "May your path of life be smooth and strewn with flowers when I am gone. If Captain Winstanley does not always treat you kindly, he will be a greater scoundrel than I think him. But he has always been kind to you, has he not, mamma? You are not hiding any sorrow of yours from me?" asked Vixen, fixing her great brown eyes on her mother's face with earnest inquiry. She had assumed the maternal part. She seemed an anxious mother questioning her daughter.

"Kind to me," echoed Mrs. Winstanley. "He has been all goodness. We have never had a difference of opinion since we were married."

"No, mamma, because you always defer to his opinion."

"Is not that my duty, when I know how clever and far-seeing he is?"

"Frankly, dear mother, are you as happy with this new husband of yours—so wise and far-seeing, and determined to have his own way in everything—as you were with my dear, indulgent, easy-tempered father?"

Pamela Winstanley burst into a passion of tears.

"How can you be so cruel?" she exclaimed. "Who can give back the past, or the freshness and brightness of one's youth? Of course I was happier with your dear father than I can ever be again. It is not in nature that it should be otherwise. How could you be so heartless as to ask me such a question?"

She dried her tears slowly, and was not easily comforted. It seemed as if that speech of Violet's had touched a spring that opened a fountain of grief.

"This means that mamma is not happy with

her second husband, in spite of her praises of him," thought Vixen.

She remained kneeling by her mother's side comforting her as best she could, until Mrs. Winstanley had recovered from the wound her daughter's heedless words had inflicted, and then Violet began to say good-bye.

"You will write to me sometimes, won't you, mamma, and tell me how the dear old place is going on, and about the old people who die—dear familiar white heads that I shall never see again——and the young people who get married, and the babies that are born? You will write often, won't you, mamma?"

"Yes, dear, as often as my strength will allow."

"You might even get Pauline to write to me sometimes, to tell me how you are and what you are doing; that would be better than nothing."

"Pauline shall write when I am not equal to holding a pen," sighed Mrs. Winstanley.

"And, dear mamma, if you can prevent it, don't let any more of the old servants be sent

away. If they drop off one by one home will seem like a strange place at last. Remember how they loved my dear father, how attached and faithful they have been to us. They are like our own flesh and blood."

"I should never willingly part with servants who know my ways, Violet. But as to Bates's dismissal—there are some things I had rather not discuss with you—I am sure that Conrad acted for the best, and from the highest motives."

"Do you know anything about this place to which I am going, mamma?" asked Vixen, letting her mother's last speech pass without comment; "or the lady who is to be my duenna?"

"Your future has been fully discussed between Conrad and me, Violet. He tells me that the old Jersey manor house—Les Tourelles it is called—is a delightful place, one of the oldest seats in Jersey, and Miss Skipwith, to whom it belongs, is a well-informed conscientious old lady, very religious, I believe, so you will have to guard against your sad habit of speaking lightly about sacred things, my dear Violet."

"Do you intend me to live there for ever, mamma?"

"For ever! What a foolish question. In six years you will be of age, and your own mistress."

"Six years—six years in a Jersey manor house—with a pious old lady. Don't you think that would seem very much like for ever, mamma?" asked Vixen gravely.

"My dear Violet, neither Conrad nor I want to banish you from your natural home. We only want you to learn wisdom. When Mr. Vawdrey is married, and when you have learnt to think more kindly of my dear husband——"

"That last change will never happen to me, mamma. I should have to die and be born again first, and, even then, I think my dislike of Captain Winstanley is so strong that purgatorial fires would hardly burn it out. No, mamma, we had better say good-bye without any forecast of the future. Let us forget all that is sad in our parting, and think we are only going to part for a little while."

Many a time in after days did Violet Tempest

remember those last serious words of hers. The rest of her conversation with her mother was about trifles, the trunks and bonnet-boxes she was to carry with her—the dresses she was to wear in her exile.

"Of course in a retired old house in Jersey, with an elderly maiden lady, you will not see much society," said Mrs. Winstanley; "but Miss Skipwith must know people—no doubt the best people in the island—and I should not like you to be shabby. Are you really positive that you have dresses enough to carry you over next winter?"

This last question was asked with deepest solemnity.

"More than enough, mamma."

"And do you think your last winter's jacket will do?"

"Excellently."

"I'm very glad of that," said her mother, with a sigh of relief, "for I have an awful bill of Theodore's hanging over my head. I have been paying her sums on account ever since your poor

papa's death; and you know that is never quite satisfactory. All that one has paid hardly seems to make any difference in the amount due at the end."

"Don't worry yourself about your bill, mamma. Let it stand over till I come of age, and then I can help you to pay it."

"You are very generous, dear; but Theodore would not wait so long, even for me. Be sure you take plenty of wraps for the steamer. Summer nights are often chilly."

Vixen thought of last night, and the long straight ride through the pine wood, the soft scented air, the young moon shining down at her, and Rorie by her side. Ah, when should she ever know such a summer night as that again?

"Sit down in this low chair by me, and have a cup of tea, dear," said Mrs. Winstanley, growing more affectionate as the hour of parting drew nearer. "Let us have kettledrum together for the last time, till you come back to us."

"For the last time, mamma!" echoed Violet sadly.

She could not imagine any possible phase of circumstances that would favour her return. Could she come back to see Roderick Vawdrey happy with his wife? Assuredly not. Could she school herself to endure life under the roof that sheltered Conrad Winstanley? A thousand times no. Coming home was something to be dreamt about when she lay asleep in a distant land; but it was a dream that never could be realised. She must make herself a new life, somehow, among new people. The old life died to-day.

She sat and sipped her tea, and listened while her mother talked cheerfully of the future, and even pretended to agree; but her heart was heavy as lead.

An hour was dawdled away thus, and then, when Mrs. Winstanley began to think about dressing for dinner, Vixen went off to finish her packing. She excused herself from going down to dinner on the plea of having so much to do.

"You could send me up something, please, mamma," she said. "I am sure you and Captain Winstanley will dine more pleasantly without me.

I shall see you for a minute in the hall, before I start."

"You must do as you please, dear," replied her mother. "I hardly feel equal to going down to dinner myself; but it would not be fair to let Conrad eat a second meal in solitude, especially when we are to be parted for two or three days and he is going across the sea. I shall not have a minute's rest to-night, thinking of you both."

"Sleep happily, dear mother, and leave us to Providence. The voyage cannot be perilous in such weather as this," said Vixen, with assumed cheerfulness.

Two hours later the carriage was at the door, and Violet Tempest was ready to start. Her trunks were on the roof of the brougham, her dressing-bag, and travelling-desk, and wraps were stowed away inside; Argus was by her side, his collar provided with a leather strap, by which she could hold him when necessary. Captain Winstanley was smoking a cigar in the porch.

Mrs. Winstanley came weeping out of the drawing-room, and hugged her daughter silently.

Violet returned the embrace, but said not a word till just at the last.

"Dear mother," she whispered earnestly, "never be unhappy about me. Let me bear the blame of all that has gone amiss between us."

"You had better be quick, Miss Tempest, if you want to be in time for the boat," said the Captain from the porch.

"I am quite ready," answered Vixen calmly.

Phœbe was at the carriage-door, tearful, and in everybody's way, but pretending to help. Argus was sent up to the box, where he sat beside the coachman with much gravity of demeanour, having first assured himself that his mistress was inside the carriage. Mrs. Winstanley stood in the porch, kissing her hand; and so the strong big horses bore the carriage away, through the dark shrubberies, between banks of shadowy foliage, out into the forest-road, which was full of ghosts at this late hour, and would have struck terror to the hearts of any horses unaccustomed to its sylvan mysteries.

They drove through Lyndhurst, where the

twinkling little lights in the shop-windows were being extinguished by envious shutters, and where the shop-keepers paused in their work of extinction to stare amazedly at the passing carriage; not that a carriage was a strange apparition in Lyndhurst, but because the inhabitants had so little to do except stare.

Anon they came to Bolton's Bench, beneath a cluster of pine-trees on a hilly bit of common, and then the long straight road to Southampton lay before them in the faint moonshine, with boggy levels, black furze-bushes, and a background of wood on either side. Violet sat looking steadily out of the window, watching every bit of the road. How could she tell when she would see it again—or if ever, save in sad regretful dreams?

They mounted the hill, from whose crest Vixen took one last backward look at the wide wild land that lay behind them—a look of ineffable love and longing. And then she threw herself back in the carriage, and gave herself up to gloomy thought. There was nothing more that she cared to see. They had entered the tame dull world of civilisa-

tion. They drove through the village of Eling, where lights burned dimly here and there in upper windows; they crossed the slow meandering river at Redbridge. Already the low line of lights in Southampton city began to shine faintly in the distance. Violet shut her eyes and let the landscape go by. Suburban villas, suburban gardens on a straight road beside a broad river with very little water in it. There was nothing here to regret.

It was past eleven when they drove under the old bar, and through the high street of Southampton. The town seemed strange to Vixen at this unusual hour. The church clocks were striking the quarter. Down by the docks everything had a gray and misty look, sky and water indistinguishable. There lay the Jersey boat, snorting and puffing, amidst the dim grayness. Captain Winstanley conducted his charge to the ladies' cabin, with no more words than were positively necessary. They had not spoken once during the drive from the Abbey House to Southampton.

"I think you had better stay down here till the vessel has started, at any rate," said the Captain

"there will be so much bustle and confusion on deck. I'll take care of your dog."

"Thanks!" answered Vixen meekly. "Yes, I'll stay here—you need not trouble yourself about me."

"Shall I send you something? A cup of tea, the wing of a chicken, a little wine and water?"

"No, thanks, I don't care about anything."

The Captain withdrew after this to look after the luggage, and to secure his own berth. The stewardess received Violet as if she had known her all her life, showed her the couch allotted to her, and to secure which the Captain had telegraphed that morning from Lyndhurst.

"It was lucky your good gentleman took the precaution to telegraph, mum," said the cordial stewardess; "the boats are always crowded at this time of year, and the *Fanny* is such a favourite."

The cabin was wide and lofty and airy, quite an exceptional thing in ladies' cabins; but presently there came a troop of stout matrons with their olive-branches, all cross and sleepy, and dazed at finding

themselves in a strange place at an unearthly hour. There was the usual sprinkling of babies, and most of the babies cried. One baby was afflicted with unmistakable whooping cough, and was a source of terror to the mothers of all the other babies. There was a general opening of hand-bags and distribution of buns, biscuits, and sweeties for the comfort and solace of this small fry. Milk was imbibed noisily out of mysterious bottles, some of them provided with gutta-percha tubes, which made the process of refreshment look like laying on gas. Vixen turned her back upon the turmoil, and listened to the sad sea waves plashing lazily against the side of the boat.

She wondered what Rorie was doing at this midnight hour? Did he know yet that she was gone—vanished out of his life for ever? No; he could hardly have heard of her departure yet awhile, swiftly as all tidings travelled in that rustic world of the Forest. Had he made up his mind to keep faith with Lady Mabel? Had he forgiven Vixen for refusing to abet him in treachery against his affianced?

"Poor Rorie," sighed the girl; "I think we might have been happy together."

And then she remembered the days of old, when Mr. Vawdrey was free, and when it had never dawned upon his slow intelligence that his old playfellow, Violet Tempest, was the one woman in all this wide world who had the power to make his life happy.

"I think he thought lightly of me because of all our foolishness when he was a boy," mused Vixen. "I seemed to him less than other women—because of those old sweet memories—instead of more."

It was a dreary voyage for Violet Tempest—a kind of maritime purgatory. The monotonous thud of the engine, the tramping of feet overhead, the creaking and groaning of the vessel, the squalling babies, the fussy mothers, the dreadful people who could not travel from Southampton to Jersey on a calm summer night without exhibiting all the horrors of sea-sickness. Vixen thought of the sufferings of poor black human creatures in the middle passage, of the ghastly terrors of a mutiny,

of a ship on fire, of the Ancient Mariner on his slimy sea, when

> The very deep did rot; O Christ,
> That ever this should be;
> Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
> Upon the slimy sea!

She wondered in her weary soul whether these horrors, which literature had made familiar to her, were much worse than the smart white and gold cabin of the good ship *Fanny*, filled to overflowing with the contents of half-a-dozen nurseries.

Towards daybreak there came a lull. The crossest of the babies had exhausted its capacity for making its fellow-creatures miserable. The sea-sick mothers and nurses had left off groaning, and starting convulsively from their pillows, with wild shrieks for the stewardess, and had sunk into troubled slumbers. Vixen turned her back upon the dreadful scene—dimly lighted by flickering oil-lamps, like those that burn before saintly shrines in an old French cathedral—and shut her eyes and tried to lose herself in the tangled wilderness of sleep. But to-night that blessed refuge of the

unhappy was closed against her. The calm angel of sleep would have nothing to do with a soul so troubled. She could only lie staring at the port-hole, which stared back at her like a giant's dark angry eye, and waiting for morning.

Morning came at last, with the skirmishing toilets of the children, fearful struggles for brushes and combs, towel fights, perpetual clamour for missing pieces of soap, a great deal of talk about strings and buttons, and a chorus of crying babies. Then stole through the stuffy atmosphere savoury odours of breakfast, the fumes of coffee, fried bacon, grilled fish. Sloppy looking cups of tea were administered to the sufferers of last night. The yellow sunshine filled the cabin. Vixen made a hasty toilet, and hurried up to the deck. Here all was glorious. A vast world of sunlit water. No sign yet of rock-bound island above the white-crested waves. The steamer might have been in the midst of the Atlantic. Captain Winstanley was on the bridge, smoking his morning cigar. He gave Violet a cool nod, which she returned as

coolly. She found a quiet corner where she could sit and watch the waves slowly rising and falling, the white foam-crests slowly gathering, the light spray dashing against the side of the boat, the cataract of white roaring water leaping from the swift paddle-wheel and melting into a long track of foam. By-and-by they came to Guernsey, which looked grim and military, and not particularly inviting, even in the morning sunlight. That picturesque island hides her beauties from those who only behold her from the sea. Here there was an exodus of passengers, and of luggage, and an invasion of natives with baskets of fruit. Vixen bought some grapes and peaches of a female native in a cap, whose patois was the funniest perversion of French and English imaginable. And then a bell rang clamorously, and there was a general stampede, and the gangway was pulled up and the vessel was steaming gaily towards Jersey; while Vixen sat eating grapes and looking dreamily skyward, and wondering whether her mother was sleeping peacefully under the dear old Abbey House roof, undisturbed by any pang

of remorse for having parted with an only child so lightly.

An hour or so and Jersey was in sight, all rocky peaks and promontories. Anon the steamer swept round a sudden curve, and lo, Vixen beheld a bristling range of fortifications, a rather untidy harbour, and the usual accompaniments of a landing-place, the midsummer sun shining vividly upon the all-pervading whiteness.

"Is this the bay that some people have compared to Naples?" Violet asked her conductor, with a contemptuous curl of her mobile lip, as she and Captain Winstanley took their seats in a roomy old fly, upon which the luggage was being piled in the usual mountainous and insecure-looking style.

"You have not seen it yet from the Neapolitan point of view," said the Captain. "This quay is not the prettiest bit of Jersey."

"I am glad of that, very glad," answered Vixen acidly; "for if it were, the Jersey notion of the beautiful would be my idea of ugliness. Oh what an utterly too horrid street!" she cried, as the fly drove through the squalid approach to the

town, past dirty gutter-bred children, and women with babies, who looked to the last degree Irish, and the dead high wall of the fortifications. "Does your aunt live hereabouts, *par exemple*, Captain Winstanley?"

"My aunt lives six good miles from here, Miss Tempest, in one of the loveliest spots in the island, amidst scenery that is almost as fine as the Pyrenees."

"I have heard people say that of anything respectable in the shape of a hill," answered Vixen, with a dubious air.

She was in a humour to take objection to everything, and had a flippant air curiously at variance with the dull aching of her heart. She was determined to take the situation lightly. Not for worlds would she have let Captain Winstanley see her wounds, or guess how deep they were. She set her face steadily towards the hills in which her place of exile was hidden, and bore herself bravely. Conrad Winstanley gave her many a furtive glance as he sat opposite her in the fly, while they drove slowly up the steep green country

lanes, leaving the white town in the valley below them.

"The place is not so bad, after all," said Vixen, looking back at the conglomeration of white walls and slate roofs, of docks and shipping, and barracks, on the edge of a world of blue water, "not nearly so odious as it looked when we landed. But it is a little disappointing at best, like all places that people praise ridiculously. I had pictured Jersey as a tropical island, with cactuses and Cape jasmine growing in the hedges, orchards of peaches and apricots, and melons running wild."

"To my mind the island is a pocket edition of Devonshire, with a dash of Brittany," answered the Captain. "There's a fig-tree for you!" he cried, pointing to a great spreading mass of five-fingered leaves lolloping over a pink plastered garden-wall—an old untidy tree that had swallowed up the whole extent of a cottager's garden. "You don't see anything like that in the Forest."

"No," answered Vixen, tightening her lips;

"we have only oaks and beeches that have been growing since the Heptarchy."

And now they entered a long lane, where the interlaced tree-tops made an arcade of foliage—a lane whose beauty even Vixen could not gainsay. Ah, there were the Hampshire ferns on the steep green banks! She gave a little choking sob at sight of them, as if they had been living things. Hart's-tongue, and lady-fern, and the whole family of osmundas. Yes; they were all there. It was like home—with a difference.

Here and there they passed a modern villa, in its park-like grounds, and the Captain, who evidently wished to be pleasant, tried to expound to Violet the conditions of Jersey leases, and the difficulties which attend the purchase of land or tenements in that feudal settlement. But Vixen did not even endeavour to understand him. She listened with an air of polite vacancy which was not encouraging.

They passed various humbler homesteads, painted a lively pink, or a refreshing lavender, with gardens where the fuchsias were trees covered

with crimson bloom, and where gigantic hydrangeas blossomed in palest pink and brightest azure in wildest abundance. Here Vixen beheld for the first time those preposterous cabbages from whose hyper-natural growth the islanders seem to derive a loftier pride than from any other productions of the island, not excepting its grapes and its lobsters.

"I don't suppose you ever saw cabbages growing six feet high before," said the Captain.

"No," answered Vixen; "they are too preposterous to be met with in a civilised country. Poor Charles the Second! I don't wonder that he was wild and riotous when he came to be king."

"Why not?"

"Because he had spent several months of exile among his loyal subjects in Jersey. A man who had been buried alive in such a fragmentary bit of the world must have required some compensation in after life."

They had mounted a long hill which seemed the pinnacle of the island, and from whose fertile summit the view was full of beauty—a green undu-

lating garden-world, ringed with yellow sands and bright blue sea; and now they began to descend gently by a winding lane where again the topmost elm-branches were interwoven, and where the glowing June day was softened to a tender twilight. A curve in the lane brought them suddenly to an old gateway, with a crumbling stone bench in a nook beside it—a bench where the wayfarer used to sit and wait for alms, when the site of Les Tourelles was occupied by a monastery.

The old manor house rose up behind the dilapidated wall—a goodly old house as to size and form—overlooking a noble sweep of hillside and valley; a house with a gallery on the roof for purposes of observation, but with as dreary and abandoned a look about its blank curtainless windows as if mansion and estate had been in Chancery for the last half-century.

"A fine old place, is it not?" asked the Captain, while a cracked bell was jingling in remote distance, amidst the drowsy summer stillness, without eliciting so much as the bark of a house-dog.

"It looks very big," Violet answered dubiously, "and very empty."

"My aunt has no relatives residing with her."

"If she had started in life with a large family of brothers and sisters I should think they would all be dead by this time," said the girl, with a stifled yawn that was half a sigh.

"How do you mean?"

"They would have died of the stillness and solitude and all-pervading desolation of Les Tourelles."

"Strange houses are apt to look desolate."

"Yes. Particularly when the windows have neither blinds nor curtains, and the walls have not been painted for a century."

After this conversation flagged. The jingling bell was once more set going in the unknown distance; Vixen sat looking sleepily at the arched roof of foliage chequered with blue sky. Argus lolled against the carriage-door with his tongue out.

They waited five minutes or so, languidly expectant. Vixen began to wonder whether the gates would ever open—whether there were really

any living human creatures in that blank dead-looking house—whether they would not have to give up all idea of entering, and drive back to the harbour, and return to Hampshire by the way they had come.

While she sat idly wondering thus, with the sleepy buzz of summer insects and melodious twittering of birds soothing her senses like a lullaby, the old gate groaned upon its rusty hinges, and a middle-aged woman in a black gown and a white cap appeared—a female who recognised Captain Winstanley with a curtsy, and came out to receive the smaller packages from the flyman.

"Antony will take the portmanteaux," she said; "the boat must have come in earlier than usual. We did not expect you so soon."

"This is one of Miss Skipwith's servants," thought Vixen; "rather a vinegary personage. I hope the other maids are nicer."

The person spoken of as Antony now appeared, and began to hale about Violet's portmanteaux. He was a middle-aged man, with a bald head and a melancholy aspect. His raiment was shabby; his

costume something between that of a lawyer's clerk and an agricultural labourer. Argus saluted this individual with a suppressed growl.

"Sh!" cried the female vindictively, flapping her apron at the dog, "whose dog is this, sir? He doesn't belong to you, surely?"

"He belongs to Miss Tempest. You must find a corner for him somewhere in the outbuildings, Hannah," said the Captain. "The dog is harmless enough, and friendly enough when he is used to people."

"That won't be much good if he bites us before he gets used to us, and we die of hydrophobia in the meantime," retorted Hannah; "I believe he has taken a dislike to Antony already."

"Argus won't bite anyone," said Vixen, laying her hand upon the dog's collar, "I'll answer for his good conduct. Please try and find him a nice snug nest somewhere—if I mustn't have him in the house."

"In the house!" cried Hannah. "Miss Skipwith would faint at the mention of such a thing. I don't know how she'll ever put up with

a huge beast like that anywhere about the place. He must be kept as much out of her sight as possible."

"I'm sorry Argus isn't welcome," said Vixen proudly.

She was thinking that her own welcome at Les Tourelles could hardly be more cordial than that accorded to Argus. She had left home because nobody wanted her there. How could she expect that anyone wanted her here, where she was a stranger, preceded, perhaps, by the reputation of her vices? The woman in the rusty mourning-gown, the man in the shabby raiment and clod-hopper boots, gave her no smile of greeting. Over this new home of hers there hung an unspeakable melancholy. Her heart sank as she crossed the threshold.

Oh, what a neglected, poverty-stricken air the garden had, after the gardens Violet Tempest had been accustomed to look upon! Ragged trees, rank grass, empty flower-beds, weeds in abundance. A narrow paved colonnade ran along one side of the house. They went by this paved way to a dingy

little door—not the hall-door, that was never opened—and entered the house by a lobby, which opened into a small parlour, dark and shabby, with one window looking into a court-yard. There were a good many books upon the green baize table-cover; pious books mostly, Vixen saw, with a strange revulsion of feeling; as if that were the culmination of her misery. There was an old-fashioned work-table, with a faded red silk well, beside the open window. A spectacle-case on the work-table, and an arm-chair before it, indicated that the room had been lately occupied. It was altogether one of the shabbiest rooms Vixen had ever seen—the furniture belonging to the most odious period of cabinet-making, the carpet unutterably dingy, the walls mildewed and mouldy, the sole decorations some pale engravings of naval battles, which might be the victories or defeats of any maritime hero, from Drake to Nelson.

"Come and see the house," said the Captain, reading the disgust in his stepdaughter's pale face.

He opened a door leading into the hall, a large

and lofty apartment, with a fine old staircase ascending to a square gallery. The heavy oak balusters had been painted white, so had the panelling in the hall. Time had converted both to a dusky gray. Some rusty odds and ends of armour, and a few dingy family portraits decorated the walls; but of furniture there was not a vestige.

Opening out of the hall there was a large long room with four windows, looking into a small wilderness that had once been garden, and commanding a fine view of land and sea. This the Captain called the drawing-room. It was sparsely furnished with a spindle-legged table, half-a-dozen arm-chairs covered with faded tapestry, an antique walnut-wood cabinet, another of ebony, a small oasis of carpet in the middle of the bare oak floor.

"This, and the parlour you have seen, are all the sitting-rooms my aunt occupies," said Captain Winstanley; "the rest of the rooms on this floor are empty, or only used for storehouses. It is a fine old house. I believe the finest in the island."

"Is there a history hanging to it?" asked

Vixen, looking drearily round the spacious desolate chamber. "Has it been used as a prison, or a madhouse, or what? I never saw a house that filled me with such nameless horrors."

"You are fanciful," said the Captain. "The house has no story except the common history of fallen fortunes. It has been in the Skipwith family ever since it was built. They were Leicestershire people, and came to Jersey after the civil war—came here to be near their prince in his exile—settled here and built Les Tourelles. I believe they expected Charles would do something handsome for them when he came into his own, but he didn't do anything. Sir John Skipwith stayed in the island and became a large landowner, and died at an advanced age—there is nothing to kill people here, you see—and the Skipwiths have been Jersey people ever since. They were once the richest family in the island. They are now one of the poorest. When I say they, I mean my aunt. She is the last of her race. The Skipwiths have crystallised into one maiden lady, my mother's only sister."

"Then your mother was a Skipwith?" asked Violet.

"Yes."

"And was she born and brought up here?"

"Yes. She never left Jersey till my father married her. He was here with his regiment when they met at the governor's ball. Oh, here is my aunt," said the Captain, as a rustling of silk sounded in the empty hall.

Vixen drew herself up stiffly, as if preparing to meet a foe. She had made up her mind to detest Miss Skipwith.

The lady of the manor entered. She shook hands with her nephew, and presented him with a pale and shrivelled cheek, which he respectfully saluted.

She was an elderly and faded person, very tall and painfully thin, but aristocratic to the highest degree. There was the indication of race in her aquiline nose, high narrow brow and neatly cut chin, her tapering hand and small slender foot. She was dressed in black silk, rustier and older than any silk Vixen had ever seen before: not

even excepting Mrs. Scobel's black silk dresses, when they had been degraded from their original rank to the scrubbery of early services and daily wear. Her thin gray hair was shaded by a black lace cap, decorated with bugles and black weedy grasses. She wore black mittens, and jet jewellery, and was altogether as deeply sable as if she had been in mourning for the whole of the Skipwith race.

She received Miss Tempest with a formal politeness which was not encouraging.

"I hope you will be able to make yourself happy here," she said; "and that you have resources within yourself that will suffice for the employment of your time and thoughts. I receive no company, and I never go out. The class of people who now occupy the island are a class with which I should not care to associate, and which, I daresay, would not appreciate me. I have my own resources, and my life is fully employed. My only complaint is that the days are not long enough. A quiet existence like mine offers vast opportunities for culture and self-im-

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provement. I hope you will take advantage of them, Miss Tempest."

Poor Violet faltered something vaguely civil, looking sorely bewildered all the time. Miss Skipwith's speech sounded so like the address of a schoolmistress that Vixen began to think she had been trapped unawares in a school, as people are sometimes trapped in a madhouse.

"I don't think Miss Tempest is much given to study," said the Captain graciously, as if he and Violet were on the friendliest terms; "but she is very fond of the country, and I am sure the scenery of Jersey will delight her. By-the-way, we ventured to bring her big dog. He will be a companion and protector for her in her walks. I have asked Doddery to find him a kennel somewhere among your capacious outbuildings."

"He must not come into the house," said Miss Skipwith grimly; "I couldn't have a dog inside my doors. I have a Persian who has been my attached companion for the last ten years. What would that dear creature's feelings be if he saw himself exposed to the attacks of a savage dog?"

"My dog is not savage, to Persians or anyone else," cried Vixen, wondering what inauspicious star had led the footsteps of an oriental wanderer to so dreary a refuge as Les Tourelles.

"You would like to see your bedroom, perhaps?" suggested Miss Skipwith, and on Violet's assenting, she was handed over to Hannah Doddery, the woman who had opened the gate.

Hannah led the way up the broad old staircase, all bare and carpetless, and opened one of the doors in the gallery. The room into which she ushered Violet was large and airy, with windows commanding the fair garden-like island, and the wide blue sea. But there was the same bare poverty-stricken look in this room as in every other part of the manor house. The bed was a tall melancholy four-poster, with scantiest draperies of faded drab damask. Save for one little islet of threadbare Brussels beside the bed, the room was carpetless. There was an ancient wainscot wardrobe with brass handles. There was a modern deal dressing-table skimpily draped with muslin, and surmounted by the smallest of looking-glasses.

There were a couple of chairs and a three-cornered washhand-stand. There was neither sofa nor writing-table. There was not an ornament on the high wooden mantelshelf, or a picture on the panelled walls. Vixen shivered as she surveyed the big barren room.

"I think you will find everything comfortable," said Mrs. Doddery, with a formal air, which seemed to say, "and whether you do or do not matters nothing to me."

"Thank you, yes, I daresay it is all right," Vixen answered absently, standing at one of the windows, gazing out over the green hills and valleys to the fair summer sea, and wondering whether she would be able to take comfort from the fertile beauty of the island.

"The bed has been well aired," continued Mrs. Doddery, "and I can answer for the cleanliness of everything."

"Thanks! Will you kindly send one of the maids to help me unpack my portmanteau?"

"I can assist you," Mrs. Doddery answered. "We have no maid-servant. My husband and I are

able to do all that Miss Skipwith requires. She is a lady who gives so little trouble."

"Do you mean to say there are no other servants in this great house—no housemaids, no cook?"

"I have cooked for Miss Skipwith for the last thirty years. The house is large, but there are very few rooms in occupation."

"I ought to have brought my maid," cried Vixen. "It will be quite dreadful. I don't want much waiting upon; but still, I'm afraid I shall give some trouble until I learn to do everything for myself. Just as if I were cast on a desert island," she said to herself in conclusion; and then she thought of Helen Rolleston, the petted beauty in Charles Reade's "Foul Play," cast with her faithful lover on an unknown island of the fair southern sea. But in this island of Jersey there was no faithful lover to give romance and interest to the situation. There was nothing but dull dreary reality.

"I daresay I shall be able to do all you require, without feeling it any extra trouble,

unless you are very helpless," said Mrs. Doddery, who was on her knees unstrapping one of the portmanteaux.

"I am not helpless," replied Vixen, "though I daresay I have been waited on much more than was good for me."

And then she knelt down before the other portmanteau, and undid the buckles of the thick leather straps, in which operation she broke more than one of her nails, and wounded her rosy finger-tips.

"Oh dear, what a useless creature I am," she thought; "and why do people strap portmanteaux so tightly? Never mind, after a month's residence at The Tourelles I shall be a Spartan."

"Would you like me to unpack your trunks for you?" inquired Mrs. Doddery, with an accent which sounded slightly ironical.

"Oh no, thanks, I can get on very well now," answered Vixen quickly; whereupon the housekeeper opened the drawers and cupboards in the big wainscot wardrobe, and left Miss Tempest to her own devices.

The shelves and drawers were neatly lined with white paper, and strewed with dried lavender. This was luxury which Vixen had not expected. She laid her pretty dresses on the shelves, smiling scornfully as she looked at them. Of what use could pretty dresses be in a desert island? And here were her riding-habit and her collection of whips—useless lumber where there was no hope of a horse. She was obliged to put her books in the wardrobe, as there was no other place for them. Her desk and workbox she was fain to place on the floor, for the small dressing-table would accommodate no more than her dressing-case, devotional books, brushes and combs, pomatum-pots and pinboxes.

"Oh dear," she sighed. "I have a great deal too much property for a desert island. I wonder whether in some odd corner of Les Tourelles I could find such a thing as a spare table?"

When she had finished her unpacking she went down to the hall. Not seeing anyone about, and desiring rather to avoid Captain Winstanley and his aunt than to rejoin them,

she wandered out of the hall into one of the many passages of the old manor house, and began a voyage of discovery on her own account.

"If they ask me what I have been doing I can say I lost myself," she thought.

She found the most curious rooms—or rather rooms that had once been stately and handsome, now applied to the most curious purposes—a dining-hall with carved stone chimney-piece and painted ceiling, used as a storehouse for apples; another fine apartment in which a heap of potatoes reposed snugly in a corner, packed in straw; there was a spacious kitchen with a fire-place as large as a moderate-sized room—a kitchen that had been abandoned altogether to spiders, beetles, rats, and mice. A whole army of four-footed vermin scampered off as Vixen crossed the threshold. She could see them scuttling and scurrying along by the wall, with a whisking of slender tails as they vanished into their holes. The beetles were disporting themselves on the desolate hearth, the spiders had woven draperies for the dim dirty windows. The rustling leaves of a fig-tree, that

had grown close to this side of the house, flapped against the window-panes with a noise of exceeding ghostliness.

From the kitchen Vixen wandered to the out-houses, and found Argus howling dismally in a grass-grown court-yard, evidently believing himself abandoned by the world. His rapture at beholding his mistress was boundless.

"You darling, I would give the world to let you loose," cried Vixen, after she had been nearly knocked down by the dog's affectionate greeting; "but I mustn't just yet. I'll come by-and-by and take you for a walk. Yes, dear old boy, we'll have a long ramble together, just as we used to do at home."

Home, now she had left it, seemed so sweet a word that her lips trembled a little as she pronounced it.

Everything without the house was as dreary as it was within. Poverty had set its mark on all things, like a blight. Decay was visible every-where—in the wood-work, in the stone-work, in hinges and handles, thresholds and lintels, ceilings

and plastered walls. It would have cost a thousand pounds to put the manor house in decent habitable order. To have restored it to its original dignity and comeliness would have cost at least five thousand. Miss Skipwith could afford to spend nothing upon the house she lived in; indeed she could barely afford the necessaries of life. So for the last thirty years Les Tourelles had been gradually decaying, until the good old house had arrived at a stage in which decay could hardly go farther without lapsing into destruction.

A door opened out of the court-yard into the weedy garden. This was not without a kind of beauty that had survived long neglect. The spreading fig-trees, the bushes of bright red fuchsia, and the unpruned roses made a fertile wilderness of flowers and foliage. There was a terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, and from this a flight of crumbling moss-grown stone steps led down to the garden, which was on the slope of the hill, and lay considerably below the level of the house.

While Vixen was perambulating the garden,

a bell rang in a cupola on the roof; and as this sounded like the summons to a meal, she felt that politeness, if not appetite, demanded her return to the house.

"Three o'clock," she said, looking at her watch. "What a late hour for luncheon!"

She made her way back to the small side-door at which she had entered with Captain Winstanley, and went into the parlour, where she found the Captain and his aunt. The table was laid, but they had not seated themselves.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," Vixen said apologetically.

"My aunt has been waiting five minutes or so; but I'm sure she will forgive you, as you don't yet know the ways of the house," replied the Captain amiably.

"We have early habits at Les Tourelles, Miss Tempest," said the lady of the manor: "we breakfast at half-past seven and dine at three; that arrangement gives me a long morning for study. At six we drink tea, and, if you care for supper, it can be served for you on a tray at half-past

nine. The house is shut, and all lamps put out, at ten."

"As regularly as on board ship," said the Captain. "I know the customs of the manor of old."

"You have never favoured me with a long visit, Conrad," remarked Miss Skipwith reproachfully.

"My life has been too busy for making long visits anywhere, my dear aunt."

They took their places at the small square table, and Miss Skipwith said grace. Antony Doddery was in attendance, clad in rusty black, and looking as like a butler as a man who cleaned windows, scrubbed floors, and hewed wood could be fairly expected to look. He removed the cover of a modest dish of fish with a grand air, and performed all the services of the table with as much dignity as if he had never been anything less than a butler. He poured out a glass of ale for the Captain and a glass of water for his mistress. Miss Skipwith seemed relieved when Violet said she preferred water to ale, and did not particularly care about wine.

"I used to drink wine at home very often, just because it was put in my glass, but I like water quite as well," said Vixen.

After the fish there came a small joint of lamb, and a couple of dishes of vegetables; then a small custard pudding, and some cheese cut up in very minute pieces in a glass dish, some raw garden-stuff which Doddery called salad, and three of last year's pears in an old Derby dessert-dish. The dinner could hardly have been smaller, but it was eminently genteel.

The conversation was entirely between Captain Winstanley and his aunt. Vixen sat and listened wonderingly, save at odd times, when her thoughts strayed back to the old life which she had done with for ever.

"You still continue your literary labours, I suppose, aunt," said the Captain.

"They are the chief object of my existence. When I abandon them I shall have done with life," replied Miss Skipwith gravely.

"But you have not yet published your book."

"No; I hope when I do that even you will hear of it."

"I have no doubt it will make a sensation."

"If it does not I have lived and laboured in vain. But my book may make a sensation, and yet fall far short of the result which I have toiled and hoped for."

"And that is——?"

"The establishment of a universal religion."

"That is a large idea!"

"Would a small idea be worth the devotion of a life? For thirty years I have devoted myself to this one scheme. I have striven to focus all the creeds of mankind in one brilliant centre—eliminating all that is base and superstitious in each several religion, crystallising all that is good and true. The Buddhist, the Brahmin, the Mahomedan, the Sun-worshipper, the Romanist, the Calvinist, the Lutheran, the Wesleyan, the Swedenborgian—each and all will find the best and noblest characteristics of his faith resolved and concentred in my universal religion. Here all creeds will meet. Gentler and wiser than the theology of Buddha; more humani-

tarian than the laws of Brahma; more temperate than the Moslem's code of morality; with a wider grasp of power than the Romanist's authoritative church; severely self-denying as Calvin's ascetic rule; simple and pious as Wesley's scheme of man's redemption; spiritual as Swedenborg's vast idea of heaven;—my faith will open its arms wide enough to embrace all. There need be no more dissent. The mighty circle of my free church will enclose all creeds and all divisions of man, and spread from the northern hemisphere to the southern seas. Heathenism shall perish before it. The limited view of Christianity which missionaries have hitherto offered to the heathen may fail: but my universal church will open its doors to all the world—and, mark my words, Conrad, all the world will enter in. I may not live to see the day. My span of life has not long to run—but that day will come."

"No doubt," replied Captain Winstanley gravely. "There is a slovenliness, so to speak, about the present arrangement of things, and a great deal of useless expense; every small town with its half-a-

dozen churches and chapels of different denominations—Episcopalians, Wesleyans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Primitive Methodists. Now on your plan one large building would do for all, like the town hall, or the general post office. There would be a wonderful economy."

"I fear you contemplate the question from an entirely temporal point of view," said Miss Skipwith, flattered but yet reproachful. "It is its spiritual aspect that is grandest."

"Naturally. But a man of the world is apt to consider the practicability of a scheme. And yours seems to me eminently practical. If you can only get the Mahomedans and the Brahmins to come in! The Roman Catholics might of course be easily won, though it would involve doing away with the Pope. There was a prophecy, by-the-way, that after the ninth Pius there would be only eleven more Popes. No doubt that prophecy pointed at your universal religion. But I fear you may have some difficulty about the Buddhists. I fancy they are rather a bigoted sect."

"The greatest bigots have but to be con-

vinced," said Miss Skipwith. "St. Paul was a bigot."

"True. Is your book nearly finished?"

"No. There are still some years of labour before me. I am now working at the Swedenborgian portion, striving to demonstrate how that great man's scheme of religion, though commonly supposed to be a new and original emanation of one mind, is in reality a reproduction of spiritual views involved in other and older religions. The Buddhists were Swedenborgians without knowing it, just as Swedenborg unconsciously was a Buddhist."

"I begin to understand. The process which you are engaged in is a kind of spiritual chemistry, in which you resolve each particular faith into its primary elements: with a view to prove that those elements are actually the same in all creeds; and that the differences which heretofore have kept mankind apart are mere divergencies of detail."

"That, crudely and imperfectly stated, is my aim," replied Miss Skipwith graciously.

This kind of conversation continued all through

dinner. Miss Skipwith talked of Buddha, and Confucius, and Mahomet, and Zuinglius, and Calvin, and Luther, as familiarly as if they had been her most intimate friends; and the Captain led her on and played her as he would have played a trout in one of the winding Hampshire streams. His gravity was imperturbable. Vixen sat and wondered whether she was to hear this kind of thing every day of her life, and whether she would be expected to ask Miss Skipwith leading questions, as the Captain was doing. It was all very well for him, who was to spend only one day at Les Tourelles; but Vixen made up her mind that she would boldly avow her indifference to all creeds and all theologians, from Confucius to Swedenborg. She might consent to live for a time amidst the dulness and desolation of Les Tourelles, but she would not be weighed down and crushed by Miss Skipwith's appalling hobby. The mere idea of the horror of having every day to discuss a subject that was in its very nature inexhaustible, filled her with terror.

"I would sooner take my meals in that aban-

doned kitchen, in the company of the rats and beetles, than have to listen every day to this kind of thing," she thought.

When dinner was over the Captain went off to smoke his cigar in the garden, and this Vixen thought a good time for making her escape.

"I should like to take a walk with my dog, if you will excuse me, Miss Skipwith," she said politely.

"My dear, you must consider yourself at liberty to employ and amuse yourself as you please, of course always keeping strictly within the bounds of propriety," solemnly replied the lady of the manor. "I shall not interfere with your freedom. My own studies are of so grave a nature that they in a measure isolate me from my fellow-creatures, but when you require and ask for sympathy and advice, I shall be ready to give both. My library is at your service, and I hope ere long you will have found yourself some serious aim for your studies. Life without purpose is a life hardly worth living. If girls of your age could only find that out, and seek their vocation early, how much grander and

nobler would be woman's place in the universe. But, alas! my dear, the common aim of girlhood seems to be to look pretty and to get married."

"I have made up my mind never to marry," said Violet, with a smile that was half sad half cynical; "so there at least you may approve of me, Miss Skipwith."

"My nephew tells me that you refused an excellent offer from an Irish peer."

"I would not have done the Irish peer so great a wrong as to have married him without loving him."

"I admire your honourable feeling," said Miss Skipwith, with solemn approval; "I, too, might have married, but the man towards whom my heart most inclined was a man of no family. I could not marry a man without family. I am weak enough to be prouder of my pedigree than other women are of beauty and fortune. I am the last of the Skipwiths, and I have done nothing to degrade my race. The family name and the family pride will die with me. There was a time when a Skipwith

owned a third of the island. Our estate has dwindled to the garden and meadows that surround this old house; our family has shrunk into one old woman; but if I can make the name of Skipwith famous before I go down to my grave, I shall not have lived and laboured in vain."

Vixen felt a thrill of pity as she listened to this brief confession of a self-deluded solitary soul, which had built its house upon sand, as hopefully as if the foundations were solidest rock. The line of demarcation between such fanaticism as Miss Skipwith's and the hallucination of an old lady in Bedlam, who fancies herself Queen Victoria, seemed to Vixen but a hair's breadth. But, after all, if the old lady and Miss Skipwith were both happy in their harmless self-deceptions, why should one pity them? The creature to be pitied is the man or woman who keenly sees and feels the hard realities of life, and cannot take pleasure in phantoms.

Vixen ran off to her room to get her hat and gloves, delighted to find herself free. Miss Skipwith was not such a very bad sort of person, after all, perhaps. Liberty to roam about the

island with her dog Vixen esteemed a great boon. She would be able to think about her troubles, unmolested by inquisitive looks or unwelcome sympathy.

She went down to the court-yard, untied the faithful Argus, and they set out together to explore the unknown, the dog in such wild spirits that it was almost impossible for Vixen to be sad. The afternoon sun was shining in all his glory, birds were singing, flickering lights and shadows playing on the grassy banks. Argus scampered up and down the lanes, and burst tumultuously through gaps in the hedges, like a dog possessed of demons.

It was a pretty little island, after all; Vixen was fain to admit as much. There was some justification for the people who sang its praises with such enthusiasm. One might have fancied it a fertile corner of Devonshire that had slipped its moorings and drifted westward on a summer sea.

"If I had Arion here, and—Rorie, I think I could be almost happy," Vixen said to herself with a dreamy smile.

"And Rorie!"

Alas, poor child! faintly, feebly steadfast in the barren path of honour: where could she not have been happy with the companion of her childhood, the one only love of her youth? Was there ever a spot of land or sea, from Hudson's Bay to the unmapped archipelago or hypothetical continent of the Southern Pole, where she could not have been happy with Roderick Vawdrey? She thought again of Helen Rolleston and her lover on the South Sea island. Ah what a happy fate was that of the consumptive heroine! Alone, protected, cherished, and saved from death by her devoted lover.

Poor Rorie! She knew how well she loved him, now that the wide sea rolled between them, now that she had said him nay, denied her love, and parted from him for ever.

She thought of that scene in the pine-wood, dimly lit by the young moon. She lived again those marvellous moments—the concentrated bliss and pain of a lifetime. She felt again the strong grasp of his hands, his breath upon her cheek,

as he bent over her shoulder. Again she heard him pleading for the life-long union her soul desired as the most exquisite happiness life could give.

I had not loved thee, dear, so well
Loved I not honour more.

Those two familiar lines flashed into her mind as she thought of her lover. To have degraded herself, to have dishonoured him; no, it would have been too dreadful! Were he to plead again she must answer again as she had answered before.

"His mother despised me," she thought. "If people in a better world are really *au courant* as to the affairs of this, I should like Lady Jane Vawdrey to know that I am not utterly without the instincts of a gentlewoman."

She wandered on, following the winding of the lanes, careless where she went, and determined to take advantage of her liberty. She met few people, and of those she did not trouble herself to ask her way.

"If I lose myself on my desert island it can't much matter," she thought. "There is no one

to be anxious about me. Miss Skipwith will be deep in her universal creed, and Captain Winstanley would be very glad for me to be lost. My death would leave him master for life of the Abbey House and all belonging to it."

She roamed on till she came to the open sea-shore; a pretty little harbour surrounded with quaint-looking houses; two or three white villas in fertile gardens, on a raised road; and, dominating all the scene, a fine old feudal castle, with keep, battlements, drawbridge, portcullis, and all that becomes a fortress.

This was Mount Orgueil, the castle in which Charles Stuart spent a short period of his life, while Cromwell was ruling by land and sea, and kingly hopes were at their lowest ebb. The good old fortress had suffered for its loyalty, for the Parliament sent Admiral Blake, with a fleet, to reduce the rebellious island to submission, and Mount Orgueil had not been strong enough to hold out against its assailants.

Violet went up the sloping path that led to the grim old gateway under the gloomy arch,

and still upward till she came to a sunny battlemented wall above the shining sea. The prospect was more than worth the trouble. Yonder, in the dim distance, were the towers of Coutance Cathedral; far away, mere spots in the blue water, were the smaller fry of the Channel Islands; below her, the yellow sands were smiling in the sun, the placid wavelets reflecting all the colour and glory of the changeful sky.

"This would not be a bad place to live in, Argus, if——"

She paused, with her arm round her dog's neck, as he stood on end, looking over the parapet, with a deep interest in possible rats or rabbits lurking in some cavity of the craggy cliff below. If! Ah, what a big "if" that was! It meant love and dear familiar companionship. It meant all Vixen's little world.

She lingered long. The scene was beautiful, and there was nothing to lure her home. Then, at last, feeling that she was treating poor Miss Skipwith badly, and that her prolonged absence might give alarm in that dreary household, she retraced her

steps, and at the foot of the craggy mount asked the nearest way to Les Tourelles.

The nearest way was altogether different from the track by which she had come, and brought her back to the old monastic gate in a little more than an hour. She opened the gate and went in. There was nothing for the most burglarious invader to steal at Les Tourelles, and bolts and locks were rarely used. Miss Skipwith was reading in her parlour, a white Persian cat dozing on a cushioned arm-chair beside her, some cups and saucers and a black teapot on a tray before her, and the rest of the table piled with books. There was no sign of Captain Winstanley.

"I'm afraid I'm rather late," Vixen said apologetically.

She felt a kind of half-pitying respect for Miss Skipwith, as a harmless lunatic.

"My dear, I daresay that as an absolute fact you are late," answered the lady of the manor, without looking up from her book, "but as time is never too long for me, I have been hardly conscious of the delay. Your stepfather has gone

down to the club at St. Helier's to see some of his old acquaintance. Perhaps you would like a cup of tea?"

Vixen replied that she would very much like some tea, whereupon Miss Skipwith poured out a weak and tepid infusion, against which the girl inwardly protested.

"If I am to exist at Les Tourelles, I must at least have decent tea," she said to herself. "I must buy an occasional pound for my own consumption, make friends with Mrs. Doddery, and get her to brew it for me."

And then Vixen knelt down by the arm-chair and tried to get upon intimate terms with the Persian. He was a serious-minded animal, and seemed inclined to resent her advances, so she left him in peace on his patchwork cushion, a relic of those earlier days when Miss Skipwith had squandered her precious hours on the feminine inanity of needlework.

Vixen thought of the German *Volkslied*, as she looked at the old lady in the black cap, bending over a ponderous volume, with the

solemn-visaged cat coiled on the chair beside her.

Minerva's Vogel war ein Kauz.

The Persian cat seemed as much an attribute of the female theologian as the bird of the goddess.

Vixen went to her room soon after dark, and thus avoided the Captain, who did not return till ten. She was worn out with the fatigue of the voyage, her long ramble, the painful thoughts and manifold agitations of the last two days. She set her candle on the dressing-table, and looked round the bare empty room, feeling as if she were in a dream. It was all strange, and unhomely, and comfortless; like one of those wild dream-pictures which seem so appallingly real in their hideous unreality.

"And I am to live here indefinitely—for the next six years, perhaps, until I come of age and am my own mistress. It is too dreadful!"

She went to bed and slept a deep and comforting sleep, for very weariness: and she dreamt that she was walking on the battlements of Mount

Orgueil, in the drowsy afternoon sunlight, with Charles Stuart; and the face of the royal exile was the face of Roderick Vawdrey, and the hand that held hers as they two stood side by side in the sunshine was the broad strong hand of her girlhood's friend.

When she went downstairs between eight and nine next morning she found Miss Skipwith pacing slowly to and fro the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, conning over the pencil notes of her yesterday's studies.

"Your stepfather has been gone half an hour, my dear," said the lady of the manor. "He was very sorry to have to go without wishing you good-bye."

CHAPTER II.

CHIEFLY FINANCIAL.

Violet was gone. Her rooms were empty; her faithful little waiting-maid was dismissed; her dog's deep-toned thunder no longer sounded through the house, baying joyous welcome when his mistress came down for her early morning ramble in the shrubberies. Arion had been sent to grass, and was running wild in fertile pastures, shoeless and unfettered as the South American mustang on his native prairie. Nothing associated with the exiled heiress was left, except the rooms she had inhabited; and even they looked blank and empty and strange without her. It was almost as if a whole family had departed. Vixen's presence seemed to have filled the house with youth, and freshness, and free joyous life. Without her all was silent as the grave.

Mrs. Winstanley missed her daughter sorely.

She had been wont to complain fretfully of the girl's exuberance; but the blank her absence made struck a chill to the mother's heart. She had fancied that life would be easier without Violet; that her union with her husband would be more complete; and now she found herself looking wistfully towards the door of her morning-room, listening vaguely for a footstep; and the figure she looked for at the door, and the footsteps she listened for in the corridor were not Conrad Winstanley's. It was the buoyant step of her daughter she missed; it was the bright frank face of her daughter she yearned for.

One day the Captain surprised her in tears, and asked the reason of her melancholy.

"I daresay it's very weak of me, Conrad," she said piteously, "but I miss Violet more and more every day."

"It is uncommonly weak of you," answered the Captain with agreeable candour, "but I suppose it's natural. People generally get attached to their worries; and as your daughter was an incessant worry, you very naturally lament her absence. I

am honest enough to confess that I am very glad she is gone. We had no domestic peace while she was with us."

"But she is not to stay away for ever, Conrad. I cannot be separated from my only daughter for ever. That would be too dreadful."

"'For ever' is a long word," answered the Captain coolly. "She will come back to us—of course."

"When, dear?"

"When she is older and wiser."

This was cold comfort. Mrs. Winstanley dried her tears, and resumed her crewel-work. The interesting variety of shades in green which modern art has discovered were a source of comfort to the mother's troubled mind. Moved to emulation by the results that had been achieved in artistic needlework by the school at South Kensington and the Royal Tapestry Manufactory at Windsor, Pamela found in her crewel-work an all-absorbing labour. Matilda of Normandy could hardly have toiled more industriously at the Bayeux tapestry than did Mrs. Winstanley, in the effort to im-

mortalise the fleeting glories of woodland blossom or costly orchid upon kitchen towelling.

It was a dull and lonely life which the mistress of the Abbey House led in these latter days of glowing summer weather; and perhaps it was only the distractions of crewels and point-lace which preserved her from melancholy madness. The Captain had been too long a bachelor to renounce the agreeable habits of a bachelor's existence. His amusements were all masculine, and more or less solitary. When there was no hunting, he gave himself up to fishing, and found his chief delight in the persecution of innocent salmon. He supplied the Abbey House larder with fish, sent an occasional basket to a friend, and despatched the surplus produce of his rod to a fishmonger in London. He was an enthusiast at billiards, and would play with innocent Mr. Scobel rather than not play at all. He read every newspaper and periodical of mark that was published. He rode a good deal, and drove not a little in a high-wheeled dog-cart; quite an impossible vehicle for a lady. He transacted all the business of house,

stable, gardens, and home-farm, and that in the most precise and punctual manner. He wrote a good many letters, and he smoked six or seven cigars every day. It must be obvious, therefore, that he had very little time to devote to his pretty middle-aged wife, whose languid airs and vapourish graces were likely to pall upon an ardent temper after a year of married life. Yet, though she found her days lonely, Mrs. Winstanley had no ground for complaint. What fault could a woman find in a husband who was always courteous and complimentary in his speech, whose domestic tastes were obvious, who thought it no trouble to supervise the smallest details of the household, who could order a dinner, lay out a garden, stock a conservatory, or amend the sanitary arrangements of a stable with equal cleverness; who never neglected a duty towards wife or society?

Mrs. Winstanley could see no flaw in the perfection of her husband's character; but it began about this time slowly to dawn upon her languid soul that, as Captain Winstanley's wife, she was

not so happy as she had been as Squire Tempest's widow.

Her independence was gone utterly. She awoke slowly to the comprehension of that fact. Her individuality was blotted out, or absorbed into her husband's being. She had no more power or influence in her own house, than the lowest scullion in her kitchen. She had given up her banking account, and the receipt of her rents, which in the days of her widowhood had been remitted to her half-yearly by the solicitor who collected them. Captain Winstanley had taken upon himself the stewardship of his wife's income. She had been inclined to cling to her cheque-book and her banking account at Southampton; but the Captain had persuaded her of the folly of such an arrangement.

"Why two balances and two accounts, when one will do?" he argued. "You have only to ask me for a cheque when you want it, or to give me your bills?"

Whereupon the bride of six weeks had yielded graciously, and the balance had been transferred

from the Southampton bank to Captain Winstanley's account at the Union.

But now, with Theodore's unsettled account of four years' standing hanging over her head by the single hair of the penny post, and likely to descend upon her any morning, Mrs. Winstanley regretted her surrendered banking account, with its balance of eleven hundred pounds or so. The Captain had managed everything with wondrous wisdom, no doubt. He had done away with all long credits. He paid all his bills on the first Saturday in the month, save such as could be paid weekly. He had reduced the price of almost everything supplied to the Abbey House, from the stable provender to the wax candles that lighted the faded sea-green draperies and white panelling of the drawing-room. The only expenditure over which he had no control was his wife's private disbursement; but he had a habit of looking surprised when she asked him for a cheque, and a business-like way of asking the amount required, which prevented her applying to him often. Still, there was that long-standing account of Madame Theodore's in the background, and

Mrs. Winstanley felt that it was an account which must be settled sooner or later. Her disinclination to ask her husband for money had tended to swell Theodore's bill. She had bought gloves, ribbons, shoes, everything from that tasteful purveyor, and had even obtained the somewhat expensive materials for her fancy work through Madame Theodore; a temporary convenience which she could hardly hope to enjoy gratis.

Like all weak women she had her occasional longings for independence, her moments of inward revolt against the smooth tyrant. The income was hers, she argued with herself sometimes, and she had a right to spend her own money as she pleased. But then she recalled her husband's grave warnings about the future and its insecurity. She had but a brief lease of her present wealth, and he was labouring to lay by a provision for the days to come.

"It would be wicked of me to thwart him in such a wise purpose," she told herself.

The restriction of her charities pained the soft-hearted Pamela not a little. To give to all who

asked her had been the one unselfish pleasure of her narrow soul. She had been imposed upon, of course; had fed families whose fathers squandered their weekly wages in the cozy taproom of a village inn; had in some wise encouraged idleness and improvident living; but she had been the comforter of many a weary heart, the benefactor of many a patient care-oppressed mother, the raiser-up of many a sickly child drooping on its bed of pain.

Now, under the Captain's rule, she had the pleasure of seeing her name honourably recorded in the subscription list of every local charity: but her hand was no longer open to the surrounding poor, her good old Saxon name of Lady had lost its ancient significance. She was no longer the giver of bread to the hungry. She sighed and submitted, acknowledging her husband's superior wisdom.

"You would not like to live in a semi-detached villa on the Southampton Road, would you, my dear Pamela?" asked the Captain.

"I might die in a semi-detached house, Conrad.

I'm sure I could not live in one," she exclaimed piteously.

"Then, my love, we must make a tremendous effort and save all we can before your daughter comes of age, or else we shall assuredly have to leave the Abbey House. We might go abroad certainly, and live at Dinan, or some quiet old French town where provisions are cheap."

"My dear Conrad, I could not exist in one of those old French towns, smelling perpetually of cabbage-soup."

"Then, my dear love, we must exercise the strictest economy, or life will be impossible six years hence."

Pamela sighed and assented, with a sinking of her heart. To her mind this word economy was absolutely the most odious in the English language. Her life was made up of trifles; and they were all expensive trifles. She liked to be better dressed than any woman of her acquaintance. She liked to surround herself with pretty things; and the prettiness must take the most fashionable form, and be frequently renewed.

She had dim ideas which she considered æsthetic, and which involved a good deal of shifting and improving of furniture.

Against all these expensive follies Captain Winstanley set his face sternly, using pretty words to his wife at all times, but proving himself as hard as rock when she tried to bend him to her will. He had not yet interfered with her toilet, for he had yet to learn what that cost.

This knowledge came upon him like a thunderclap one sultry morning in July—real thunder impending in the metallic-tinted sky—about a month after Vixen's departure.

Theodore's long-expected bill was among the letters in the morning's bag—a bulky envelope which the Captain handed to his wife with his usual politeness. He never opened her letters, but he invariably asked to see them, and she always handed her correspondence over to him with a childlike meekness. To-day she was slow to hand the Captain her letter. She sat looking at the long list of items with a clouded brow, and

forgot to pour out her husband's coffee in the abstraction of a troubled mind.

"I'm afraid your letters of this morning are not of a very pleasant character, my love," said the Captain, watchful of his wife's clouded countenance. "Is that a bill you are examining? I thought we paid ready money for everything."

"It is my dressmaker's bill," faltered Mrs. Winstanley.

"A dressmaker's bill! That can't be very alarming. You look as awful, and the document looks as voluminous, as if it were a lawyer's bill, including the costs of two or three unlucky Chancery suits, or half-a-dozen conveyances. Let me have the account, dear, and I'll send your dressmaker a cheque next Saturday."

He held out his hand for the paper, but Pamela did not give it to him.

"I'm afraid you'll think it awfully high, Conrad," she said, in a deprecating tone. "You see it has been running a long time—since the Christmas before dear Edward's death, in fact. I have paid Theodore sums on account in the meanwhile,

but those seem to go for very little against the total of her bill. She is expensive, of course. All West End milliners are; but her style is undeniable, and she is in direct association with Worth."

"My dear Pamela, I did not ask you for her biography, I asked only for her bill. Pray let me see the total, and tell me if you have any objections to make against the items."

"No," sighed Mrs. Winstanley, bending over the document with a perplexed brow, "I believe—indeed, I am sure—I have had all the things. Many of them are dearer than I expected; but there is no rule as to the price of anything thoroughly Parisian, that has not been seen in London. One has to pay for style and originality. I hope you won't be vexed at having to write so large a cheque, Conrad, at a time when you are so anxious to save money. Next year I shall try my best to economise."

"My dearest Pamela, why beat about the bush? The bill must be paid, whatever its amount. I suppose a hundred pounds will cover it?"

"Oh Conrad, when many women give a hundred pounds for a single dress!"

"When they do I should say that Bedlam must be their natural and fitting abode," retorted the Captain, with suppressed ire. "The bill is more than a hundred then? Pray give it me, Pamela, and make an end of this foolishness."

This time Captain Winstanley went over to his wife, and took the paper out of her hand. He had not seen the total, but he was white with rage already. He had made up his mind to squeeze a small fortune out of the Abbey House estate during his brief lease of the property: and here was this foolish wife of his squandering hundreds upon finery.

"Be kind enough to pour me out a cup of coffee," he said, resuming his seat, and deliberately spreading out the bill.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, after a glance at the total. "This is too preposterous. The woman must be mad."

The total was seventeen hundred and sixty-four pounds fourteen and sixpence. Mrs. Winstanley's

payments on account amounted to four hundred pounds; leaving a balance of thirteen hundred and sixty-four pounds for the Captain to liquidate.

"Indeed, dear Conrad, it is not such a very tremendous account," pleaded Pamela, appalled by the expression of her husband's face. "Theodore has customers who spend two thousand a year with her."

"Very laudable extravagance, if they are the wives of millionaires, and have silver-mines, or cotton-mills, or oil-wells to maintain them. But that the widow of a Hampshire squire, a lady who six years hence will have to exist upon a pittance, should run up such a bill as this, is to my mind an act of folly that is almost criminal. From this moment I abandon all my ideas of nursing your estate, of providing comfortably for our future. Henceforward we must drift towards insolvency, like other people. It would be worse than useless for me to go on racking my brains in the endeavour to secure a given result, when behind my back your thoughtless extravagance is stultifying all my efforts."

Here Mrs. Winstanley dissolved into tears.

"Oh Conrad! How can you say such cruel things?" she sobbed. "I go behind your back! I stultify you! When I have allowed myself to be ruled and governed in everything! When I have even parted with my only child to please you!"

"Not till your only child had tried to set the house on fire."

"Indeed, Conrad, you are mistaken there. She never meant it."

"I know nothing about her meaning," said the Captain moodily. "She did it."

"It is too cruel, after all my sacrifices, that I should be called extravagant—and foolish—and criminal. I have only dressed as a lady ought to dress—out of mere self-respect. Dear Edward always liked to see me look nice. He never said an unkind word about my bills. It is a sad—sad change for me."

"Your future will be a sadder change, if you go on in the way you are going," retorted the Captain. "Let me see: your income, after Violet

comes of age, is to be fifteen hundred a year. You have been spending six hundred a year upon millinery. That leaves nine hundred for everything else — stable, garden, coals, taxes, servants' wages, wine — to say nothing of such trifling claims as butcher and baker, and the rest of it. You will have to manage with wonderful cleverness to make both ends meet."

"I am sure I would sacrifice anything rather than live unhappily with you, Conrad," Mrs. Winstanley murmured piteously, drinking much strong tea in her agitation, the cup shaking in her poor little white weak hand. "Nothing could be so dreadful to me as to live on bad terms with you. I have surrendered so much for your love, Conrad. What would become of me, if I lost that? I will give up dealing with Theodore, if you like—though it will be a hard trial, after she has worked for me so many years, and has studied my style and knows exactly what suits me. I will dress ever so plainly, and even have my gowns made by a Southampton dressmaker, though that will be too

dreadful. You will hardly recognise me. But I will do anything—anything, Conrad, rather than hear you speak so cruelly."

She went over to him and laid her hand tremulously on his shoulder, and looked down at him with piteous, pleading eyes. No Circassian slave, afraid of bowstring and sack, could have entreated her master's clemency with deeper self-abasement.

Even Conrad Winstanley's hard nature was touched by the piteousness of her look and tone. He took the hand gently and raised it to his lips.

"I don't mean to be cruel, Pamela," he said. "I only want you to face the truth, and to understand your future position. It is your own money you are squandering, and you have a right to waste it, if it pleases you to do so. But it is a little hard for a man who has laboured and schemed for a given result, suddenly to find himself out in his calculations by so much as thirteen hundred and sixty-four pounds. Let us say no more about it, my dear. Here is the bill, and it must be

paid. We have only to consider the items, and see if the prices are reasonable."

And then the Captain, with bent brow and serious aspect, began to read the lengthy record of an English lady's folly. Most of the items he passed over in silence, or with only a sigh, keeping his wife by his side, looking over his shoulder.

"Point out anything that is wrong," he said; but as yet Mrs. Winstanley had found no error in the bill.

Sometimes there came an item which moved the Captain to speech. "A dinner-dress, *pain brûlé* brocade, mixed *poult de soie, manteau de cour*, lined ivory satin, trimmed with hand-worked embroidery of wild flowers on Brussels net, sixty-three pounds.

"What in the name of all that's reasonable is *pain brûlé?*" asked the Captain impatiently.

"It's the colour, Conrad. One of those delicate tertiaries that have been so much worn lately."

"Sixty guineas for a dinner-dress! That's rather stiff. Do you know that a suit of dress-

clothes costs me nine pounds, and lasts almost as many years ?"

"My dear Conrad, for a man it is so different. No one looks at your clothes. That dress was for Lady Ellangowan's dinner. You made me very happy that night, for you told me I was the best-dressed woman in the room."

"I should not have been very happy myself if I had known the cost of your gown," answered the Captain grimly. "Fifteen guineas for a Honiton *fichu!*" he cried presently. "What in mercy's name is a *fichu?* It sounds like a sneeze."

"It is a little half-handkerchief I wear to brighten a dark silk dress when we dine alone, Conrad. You know you have always said that lace harmonises a woman's dress, and gives a softness to the complexion and contour."

"I shall be very careful what I say in future," muttered the Captain, as he went on with the bill. "French cambric *peignoir*, trimmed real Valenciennes, turquoise ribbon, nineteen guineas," he read presently. "Surely you would never give

twenty pounds for the gown you wear when you are having your hair dressed?"

"That is only the name, dear. It is really a breakfast-dress. You know you always like to see me in white of a morning."

The Captain groaned and said nothing.

"Come," he said, by-and-by, "this surely must be a mistake. 'Shooting-dress, superfine silk corduroy, trimmed and lined with cardinal *poult de soie*, oxydised silver buttons, engraved hunting subjects, twenty-seven guineas.' Thank Heaven you are not one of those masculine women who go out shooting, and jump over five-barred gates."

"The dress is quite right, dear, though I don't shoot. Theodore sent it me for a walking-dress, and I have worn it often when we have walked in the Forest. You thought it very stylish and becoming, though just a little fast."

"I see," said the Captain, with a weary air, "your not shooting does not hinder your having shooting-dresses. Are there any fishing-costumes, or riding-habits, in the bill?"

"No, dear. It was Theodore's own idea to send me the corduroy dress. She thought it so new and *recherché*, and even the Duchess admired it. Mine was the first she had ever seen."

"That was a triumph worth twenty-seven guineas, no doubt," sighed the Captain. "Well, I suppose there is no more to be said. The bill to me appears iniquitous. If you were a duchess or a millionaire's wife, of course it would be different. Such women have a right to spend all they can upon dress. They encourage trade. I am no Puritan. But when a woman dresses beyond her means—above her social position—I regret the wise old sumptuary laws which regulated these things, in the days when a fur coat was a sign of nobility. If you only knew, Pamela, how useless this expensive finery is, how little it adds to your social status, how little it enhances your beauty! Why, the finest gown this Madame Theodore ever made cannot hide one of your wrinkles."

"My wrinkles!" cried Pamela, sorely wounded. "That is the first time I ever heard of them. To

think that my husband should be the first to tell me I am getting an old woman! But I forgot, you are younger than I, and I daresay in your eyes I seem quite old."

"My dear Pamela, be reasonable. Can a woman's forehead at forty be quite as smooth as it was at twenty? However handsome a woman is at that age—and to my mind it is almost the best age for beauty, just as the ripe rich colouring of a peach is lovelier than the poor little pale blossom that preceded it—however attractive a middle-aged woman may be there must be some traces to show that she has lived half her life; and to suppose that *pain brûlé* brocade, and hand-worked embroidery, can obliterate those, is extreme folly. Dress in rich and dark velvets, and old point-lace that has been twenty years in your possession, and you will be as beautiful and as interesting as a portrait by one of the old Venetian masters. Can Theodore's highest art make you better than that? Remember that excellent advice of old Polonius's,

> Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
> But not expressed in fancy.

It is the fancy that swells your milliner's bill, the newly-invented trimmings, the complex and laborious combinations."

"I will be dreadfully economical in future, Conrad. For the last year I have dressed to please you."

"But what becomes of all these gowns?" asked the Captain, folding up the bill; "what do you do with them?"

"They go out."

"Out where? To the colonies?"

"No, dear; they go out of fashion; and I give them to Pauline."

"A sixty-guinea dress flung to your waiting-maid! The Duchess of Dovedale could not do things in better style."

"I should be very sorry not to dress better than the Duchess," said Mrs. Winstanley, "she is always hideously dowdy. But a duchess can afford to dress as badly as she likes."

"I see. Then it is we only who occupy the border-land of society who have to be careful. Well, my dear Pamela, I shall send Madame

Theodore her cheque, and with your permission close her account; and, unless you receive some large accession of fortune I should recommend you not to reopen it."

His wife gave a heart-breaking sigh.

"I would sacrifice anything for your sake, Conrad," she said, "but I shall be a perfect horror, and you will hate me."

"I fell in love with you, my dear, not with your gown."

"But you fell in love with me in my gown, dear; and you don't know how different your feelings might have been if you had seen me in a gown cut by a country dressmaker."

CHAPTER III.

"WITH WEARY DAYS THOU SHALT BE CLOTHED AND FED."

CAPTAIN WINSTANLEY never again alluded to the dressmaker's bill. He was too wise a man to re-open old wounds or to dwell upon small vexations. He had invested every penny that he could spare, leaving the smallest balance at his banker's compatible with respectability. He had to sell some railway shares in order to pay Madame Theodore. Happily the shares had gone up since his purchase of them, and he lost nothing by the transaction; but it galled him sorely to part with the money. It was as if an edifice that he had been toilfully raising, stone by stone, had begun to crumble under his hands. He knew not when or whence the next call might come. The time in which he had to save money was so short. Only six years, and the heiress would claim her estate, and Mrs. Winstanley would

be left with the empty shell of her present position — the privilege of occupying a fine old Tudor mansion, with enormous stables, and fifteen acres of garden and shrubberies, and an annuity that would barely suffice to maintain existence in a third-rate London square.

Mrs. Winstanley was slow to recover from the shock of her husband's strong language about Theodore's bill. She was sensitive about all things that touched her own personality, and she was peculiarly sensitive about the difference between her husband's age and her own. She had married a man who was her junior; but she had married him with the conviction that, in his eyes at least, she had all the bloom and beauty of youth, and that he admired and loved her above all other women. That chance allusion to her wrinkles had pierced her heart. She was deeply afflicted by the idea that her husband had perceived the signs of advancing years in her face. And now she fell to perusing her looking-glass more critically than she had ever done before. She saw herself in the searching north light; and the north light

was more cruel and more candid than Captain Winstanley. There were lines on her forehead — unmistakable, ineffaceable lines. She could wear her hair in no way that would hide them, unless she had hidden her forehead altogether under a bush of frizzy fluffy curls. There was a faded look about her complexion, too, which she had never before discovered — a wanness, a yellowness. Yes, these things meant age! In such a spirit, perchance, did Elizabeth of England survey the reflection in her mirror, until all the glories of her reign seemed as nothing to her when weighed against this dread horror of fast-coming age. And luckless Mary, cooped up in the narrow rooms at Fotheringay, may have deemed captivity, and the shadow of doom, as but trifling ills compared with the loss of youth and beauty. Once to have been exquisitely beautiful, the inspiration of poets, the chosen model of painters, and to see the glory fading — that, for a weak woman, must be sorrow's crown of sorrow.

Anon dim feelings of jealousy began to gnaw Pamela's heart. She grew watchful of her husband's

attentions to other women, suspicious of looks and words that meant no more than a man's desire to please. Society no longer made her happy. Her Tuesday afternoons lost their charm. There was poison in everything. Lady Ellangowan's flirting ways, which had once only amused her, now tortured her. Captain Winstanley's devotion to this lively matron, which had heretofore seemed only the commoner's tribute of respect to the peeress, now struck his wife as a too obvious infatuation for the woman. She began to feel wretched in the society of certain women—nay, of all women who were younger, or possibly more attractive, than herself. She felt that the only security for her peace would be to live on a desert island with the husband she had chosen. She was of too weak a mind to hide these growing doubts and ever-augmenting suspicions. The miserable truth oozed out of her in foolish little speeches; those continual droppings that wear the hardest stone, and which wore even the adamantine surface of the Captain's tranquil temper. There was a homœopathic admixture of this jealous poison in all

the food he ate. He could rarely get through a *tête-à-tête* breakfast or dinner undisturbed by some invidious remark.

One day the Captain rose up in his strength, and grappled with this jealous demon. He had let the little speeches, the random shots, pass unheeded until now; but on one particularly dismal morning, a bleak March morning, when the rain beat against the windows, and the deodoras and cypresses were lashed and tormented by the blusterous wind, and the low sky was darkly gray, the Captain's temper suddenly broke out.

"My dear Pamela, is it possible that these whimpering little speeches of yours mean jealousy?" he asked, looking at her severely from under bent brows.

"I'm sure I never said that I was jealous," faltered Pamela, stirring her tea with a nervous movement of her thin white hand.

"Of course not; no woman cares to describe herself in plain words as an idiot; but of late you have favoured me with a good many imbecile remarks, which all seem to tend one way. You are

hurt and wounded when I am decently civil to the women I meet in society. Is that sensible or reasonable, in a woman of your age and experience?"

"You used not to taunt me with my age before we were married, Conrad."

"Do I taunt you with it now? I only say that a woman of forty"—Mrs. Winstanley shuddered—"ought to have more sense than a girl of eighteen; and that a woman who has had twenty years' experience of well-bred society ought not to put on the silly jealousies of a schoolgirl trying to provoke a quarrel with her first lover."

"It is all very well to pretend to think me weak and foolish, Conrad. Yes, I know I am weak, ridiculously weak, in loving you as intensely as I do. But I cannot help that. It is my nature to cling to others, as the ivy clings to the oak. I would have clung to Violet, if she had been more loving and lovable. But you cannot deny that your conduct to Lady Ellangowan yesterday afternoon was calculated to make any wife unhappy."

"If a wife is to be unhappy because her

husband talks to another woman about her horses and her gardens, I suppose I gave you sufficient cause for misery," answered the Captain sneeringly. "I can declare that Lady Ellangowan and I were talking of nothing more sentimental."

"Oh Conrad, it is not *what* you talked about, though your voice was so subdued that it was impossible for anyone to know what you were saying——"

"Except Lady Ellangowan."

"It was your manner. The way you bent over her, your earnest expression."

"Would you have had me stand three yards off and bawl at the lady? Or am I bound to assume that bored and vacuous countenance which some young men consider good form? Come, my dear Pamela, pray let us be reasonable. Here are you and I settled for life beside the domestic hearth. We have no children. We are not particularly well-off—it will be as much as we shall be able to do, by-and-by, to make both ends meet. We are neither of us getting younger. These things are serious cares, and we have to

bear them. Why should you add to these an imaginary trouble, a torment that has no existence, save in your own perverse mind? If you could but know my low estimate of the women to whom I am civil! I like society: and to get on in society a man must make himself agreeable to influential women. It is the women who have the reins in the social race, and by-and-by, if I should go into Parliament——"

"Parliament!" cried his wife affrightedly. "You want to become a Member of Parliament, and to be out at all hours of the night! Our home-life would be altogether destroyed then."

"My dear Pamela, if you take such pains to make our home-life miserable, it will be hardly worth preserving," retorted the Captain.

"Conrad, I am going to ask you a question—a very solemn question."

"You alarm me."

"Long ago—before we were married—when Violet was arguing with me against our marriage—you know how vehemently she opposed it—"

"Perfectly. Go on."

"She told me that you had proposed to her before you proposed to me. Oh Conrad, could that be true?"

The heartrending tone in which the question was asked, the pathetic look that accompanied it, convinced Captain Winstanley that, if he valued his domestic peace, he must perjure himself.

"It had no more foundation than many other assertions of that young lady's," he said. "I may have paid her compliments, and praised her beauty; but how could I think of her for a wife, when you were by? Your soft confiding nature conquered me before I knew that I was hit."

He got up and went over to his wife and kissed her kindly enough, feeling sorry for her as he might have done for a wayward child that weeps it scarce knows wherefore, oppressed by a vague sense of affliction.

"Let us try to be happy together, Pamela," he pleaded, with a sigh, "life is weary work at best."

"That means that you are not happy, Conrad."

"My love, I am as happy as you will let me be."

"Have I ever opposed you in anything?"

"No, dear; but lately you have indulged in covert upbraidings that have plagued me sorely. Let us have no more of them. As for your daughter"—his face darkened at the mention of that name—"understand at once and for ever that she and I can never inhabit the same house. If she comes, I go. If you cannot live without her you must learn to live without me."

"Conrad, what have I done that you should talk of such a thing? Have I asked you to let Violet come home?"

"No, but you have behaved mopishly of late, as if you were pining for her return."

"I pine for nothing but your love."

"That has always been yours."

With this assurance Mrs. Winstanley was fain to content herself, but even this assurance did not make her happy. The glory and brightness had departed from her life somehow; and neither kind words nor friendly smiles from the Captain could lure them back. There are stages in the lives of all of us when life seems hardly worth living: not

periods of great calamity, but dull level bits of road along which the journey seems very weary. The sun has hidden himself behind gray clouds, cold winds are blowing up from the bitter east, the birds have left off singing, the landscape has lost its charm. We plod on drearily, and can see no Pole Star in life's darkening sky.

It had been thus of late with Pamela Winstanley. Slowly and gradually the conviction had come to her that her second marriage had been a foolish and ill-advised transaction, resulting inevitably in sorrow and unavailing remorse. The sweet delusion that it had been a love-match on Captain Winstanley's side, as well as on her own, abandoned her all at once, and she found herself face to face with stern common sense.

That scene about Theodore's bill had exercised a curious effect upon her mind. To an intellect so narrow, trifles were important, and that the husband who had so much admired and praised the elegance of her appearance could grudge the cost of her toilet galled her sorely. It was positively for her the first revelation of her husband's cha-

racter. His retrenchments in household expenses she had been ready to applaud as praiseworthy economies; but when he assailed her own extravagance, she saw in him a husband who loved far too wisely to love well.

"If he cared for me, if he valued my good looks, he could never object to my spending a few pounds upon a dress," she told herself.

She could not take the Captain's common-sense view of a subject so important to herself. Love in her mind meant a blind indulgence like the Squire's. Love that could count the cost of its idol's caprices, and calculate the chances of the future, was not love. That feeling of poverty, too, was a new sensation to the mistress of the Abbey House, and a very unpleasant one. Married very young to a man of ample means, who adored her, and never set the slightest restriction upon her expenditure, extravagance had become her second nature. To have to study every outlay, to ask herself whether she could not do without a thing, was a hard trial; but it had become so painful to her to ask the Captain for money that she pre-

ferred the novel pain of self-denial to that humiliation. And then there was the cheerless prospect of the future always staring her in the face, that dreary time after Violet's majority, when it would be a question whether she and her husband could afford to go on living at the Abbey House.

"Everybody will know that my income is diminished," she thought. "However well we may manage, people will know that we are pinching."

This was a vexatious reflection. The sting of poverty itself could not be so sharp as the pain of being known to be poor.

Captain Winstanley pursued the even tenor of his way all this time, and troubled himself but little about his wife's petty sorrows. He did his duty to her according to his own lights, and considered that she had no ground for complaint. He even took pains to be less subdued in his manner to Lady Ellangowan, and to give no shadow of reason for the foolish jealousy he so much despised. His mind was busy about his own affairs. He had

saved money since his marriage, and he employed himself a good deal in the investment of his savings. So far he had been lucky in all he touched, and had contrived to increase his capital by one or two speculative ventures in foreign railways. If things went on as well for the next six years he and his wife might live at the Abbey House, and maintain their station in the county, till the end of the chapter.

"I daresay Pamela will outlive me," thought the Captain; "those fragile-looking invalid women are generally long lived. And I have all the chances of the hunting-field, and vicious horses, and other men's blundering with loaded guns, against me. What can happen to a woman who sits at home and works crewel antimacassars and reads novels all day, and never drinks anything stronger than tea, and never eats enough to disturb her digestion? She ought to be a female Methuselah."

Secure in this idea of his wife's longevity, and happy in his speculations, Captain Winstanley

looked forward cheerfully to the future: and the evil shadow of the day when the hand of fate should thrust him from the good old house where he was master had never fallen across his dreams.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE AND ÆSTHETICS.

Spring had returned, primroses and violets were being sold at the street-corners, Parliament was assembled, and London had reawakened from its wintry hibernation to new life and vigour. The Dovedales were at their Kensington mansion. The Duchess had sent forth her cards for alternate Thursday evenings of a quasi-literary and scientific character. Lady Mabel was polishing her poems with serious thoughts of publication, but with strictest secrecy. No one but her parents and Roderick Vawdrey had been told of these poetic flights. The book would be given to the world under a *nom de plume*. Lady Mabel was not so much a Philistine as to suppose that writing good poetry could be a disgrace to a duke's daughter; but she felt that the house of Ashbourne would be seriously compromised were the critics to find her

guilty of writing doggerel; and critics are apt to deal harshly with the titled muse. She remembered Brougham's savage onslaught upon the boy Byron.

Mr. Vawdrey was in town. He rode a good deal in the Row, spent an hour or so daily at Tattersall's, haunted three or four clubs of a juvenile and frivolous character, drank numerous bottles of Apolinaris, and found the task of killing time rather hard labour. Of course there were certain hours in which he was on duty at Kensington. He was expected to eat his luncheon there daily, to dine when neither he nor the ducal house had any other engagement, and to attend all his aunt's parties. There was always a place reserved for him at the dinner-table, however middle-aged and politically or socially important the assembly might be.

He was to be married early in August. Everything was arranged. The honeymoon was to be spent in Sweden and Norway—the only accessible part of Europe which Lady Mabel had not explored. They were to see everything remarkable in the

two countries, and to do Denmark as well, if they had time. Lady Mabel was learning Swedish and Norwegian, in order to make the most of her opportunities.

"It is so wretched to be dependent upon couriers and interpreters," she said. "I shall be a more useful companion for you, Roderick, if I thoroughly know the language of each country."

"My dear Mabel, you are a most remarkable girl," exclaimed her betrothed admiringly. "If you go on at this rate, by the time you are forty you will be as great a linguist as Cardinal Wiseman."

"Languages are very easy to learn when one has the habit of studying them, and a slight inclination for etymology," Lady Mabel replied modestly.

Now that the hour of publication was really drawing nigh, the poetess began to feel the need of a confidante. The Duchess was admiring but somewhat obtuse, and rarely admired in the right place. The Duke was out of the question.

If a new Shakespeare had favoured him with the first reading of a tragedy as great as "Hamlet," the Duke's thoughts would have wandered off to the impending dearth of guano, or the probable exhaustion of Suffolk punches, and the famous breed of Chillingham oxen. So, for want of anyone better, Lady Mabel was constrained to read her verses to her future husband; just as Molière read his plays to his housekeeper, for want of any other hearer, the two Béjarts, aunt and niece, having naturally plays enough and to spare in the theatre.

Now, in this crucial hour of her poetic career, Mabel Ashbourne wanted something more than a patient listener. She wanted a critic with a fine ear for rhythm and euphony. She wanted a judge who could nicely weigh the music of a certain combination of syllables, and who could decide for her when she hesitated between two epithets of equal force, but varying depths of tone.

To this nice task she invited her betrothed sometimes on a sunny April afternoon, when luncheon was over, and the lovers were free to repair to Lady Mabel's own particular den—an airy

room on an upper floor, with quaint old Queen Anne casements opening upon a balcony crammed with flowers, and overlooking the umbrageous avenues of Kensington Garden, with a glimpse of the old red palace in the distance.

Rorie did his best to be useful, and applied himself to his duty with perfect heartiness and good-temper; but luncheon and the depressing London atmosphere made him sleepy, and he had sometimes hard work to stifle his yawns, and to keep his eyes open, while Lady Mabel was deep in the entanglement of lines which soared to the seventh heaven of metaphysics. Unhappily Rorie knew hardly anything about metaphysics. He had never read Victor Cousin, or any of the great German lights; and a feeling of despair took possession of him when his sweetheart's poetry degenerated into diluted Hegelism, or rose to a feeble imitation of Browning's obscurest verse.

"Either I must be intensely stupid or this must be rather difficult to understand," he thought helplessly, when Mabel had favoured him with the perusal of the first act of a tragedy or poetic

duologue, in which the hero, a kind of milk-and-watery Faustus, held converse, and argued upon the deeper questions of life and faith, with a very mild Mephisto.

"I'm afraid you don't like the opening of my 'Tragedy of the Sceptic Soul,'" Lady Mabel said with a somewhat offended air, as she looked up at the close of the act, and saw poor Rorie gazing at her with watery eyes, and an intensely despondent expression of countenance.

"I'm afraid I'm rather dense this afternoon," he said with hasty apology, "I think your first act is beautifully written—the lines are full of music; nobody with an ear for euphony could doubt that; but I—forgive me, I fancy you are sometimes a shade too metaphysical—and those scientific terms which you occasionally employ, I fear will be a little over the heads of the general public——"

"My dear Roderick, do you suppose that in an age whose highest characteristic is the rapid advance of scientific knowledge, there can be anybody so benighted as not to understand the terminology of science?"

"Perhaps not, dear. I fear I am very much behind the times. I have lived too much in Hampshire. I frankly confess that some expressions in your—er—Tragedy—of—er—Soulless Scept—Sceptic Soul—were Greek to me."

"Poor dear Roderick, I should hardly take you as the highest example of the *Zeitgeist*; but I won't allow you to call yourself stupid. I'm glad you like the swing of the verse. Did it remind you of any contemporary poet?"

"Well, yes, I think it dimly suggested Browning."

"I am glad of that. I would not for worlds be an imitator; but Browning is my idol among poets."

"Some of his minor pieces are awfully jolly," said the incorrigible Rorie. "That little poem called 'Youth and Art,' for instance. And 'James Lee's Wife' is rather nice, if one could quite get at what it means. But I suppose that is too much to expect from any great poet?"

"There are deeper meanings beneath the surface—meanings which require study," replied

Mabel condescendingly. "Those are the religion of poetry——"

"No doubt," assented Rorie hastily; "but frankly, my dear Mabel, if you want your book to be popular——"

"I don't want my book to be popular. Browning is not popular. If I had wanted to be popular, I should have worked on a lower level. I would even have stooped to write a novel."

"Well then, I will say if you want your poem to be understood by the average intellect, I really would sink the scientific terminology, and throw overboard a good deal of the metaphysics. Byron has not a scientific or technical phrase in all his poems."

"My dear Roderick, you surely would not compare me to Byron, the poet of the Philistines. You might as well compare me with the author of 'Lalla Rookh,' or advise me to write like Rogers or Campbell."

"I beg your pardon, my dear Mabel. I'm afraid I must be an out and out Philistine, for to my mind Byron is the prince of poets. I would

rather have written 'The Giaour' than anything that has ever been published since it appeared."

"My poor Roderick!" exclaimed Mabel, with a pitying sigh. "You might as well say you would be proud of having written 'The Pickwick Papers.'"

"And so I should!" cried Rorie heartily. "I should think no end of myself if I had invented Winkle. Do you remember his ride from Rochester to Dingley Dell?—one of the finest things that was ever written."

And this incorrigible young man flung himself back in the low arm-chair, and laughed heartily at the mere recollection of that episode in the life of the famous Nathaniel. Mabel Ashbourne closed her manuscript volume with a sigh, and registered an oath that she would never read any more of her poetry to Roderick Vawdrey. It was quite useless. The poor young man meant well, but he was incorrigibly stupid—a man who admired Byron and Dickens, and believed Macaulay the first of historians.

"In the realm of thought we must dwell

apart all our lives," Mabel told herself despairingly.

"The horses are ordered for five," she said, as she locked the precious volume in her desk; "will you get yours and come back for me?"

"I shall be delighted," answered her lover, relieved at being let off so easily.

It was about this time that Lord Mallow, who was working with all his might for the regeneration of his country, made a great hit in the House by his speech on the Irish land question. He had been doing wonderful things in Dublin during the winter, holding forth to patriotic assemblies in the Round Room of the Rotunda, boldly declaring himself a champion of the Home Rulers' cause, demanding Repeal and nothing but Repeal. He was one of the few Repealers who had a stake in the country, and who was likely to lose by the disruption of social order. If foolish, he was at least disinterested, and had the courage of his opinions. This was in the days when Mr. Gladstone was Prime Minister, and when Irish Radicals

looked to him as the one man who could and would give them Home Rule.

In the House of Commons Lord Mallow was not ashamed to repeat the arguments he had used in the Round Room. If his language was less vehement at Westminster than it had been in Dublin, his opinions were no less thorough. He had his party here, as well as on the other side of the Irish Channel; and his party applauded him. Here was a statesman and a landowner willing to give an ell, where Mr. Gladstone's Land Act gave only an inch. Hibernian newspapers sung his praises in glowing words, comparing him to Burke, Curran, and O'Connell. He had for some time been a small lion at evening parties; he now began to be lionised at serious dinners. He was thought much of in Carlton Gardens, and his name figured at official banquets in Downing Street. The Duchess of Dovedale considered it a nice trait in his character that, although he was so much in request, and worked so hard in the House, he never missed one of her Thursday evenings. Even when there was an

important debate on he would tear up Birdcage Walk in a hansom, and spend an hour in the Duchess's amber drawing-rooms, enlightening Lady Mabel as to the latest aspect of the Policy of Conciliation, or standing by the piano while she played Chopin.

Lord Mallow had never forgotten his delight at finding a young lady thoroughly acquainted with the history of his native land, thoroughly interested in Erin's struggles and Erin's hopes; a young lady who knew all about the Protestants of Ulster, and what was meant by Fixity of Tenure. He came to Lady Mabel for sympathy in his triumphs, and he came to her in his disappointments. She was pleased and flattered by his faith in her wisdom, and was always ready to lend a gracious ear. She, whose soul was full of ambition, was deeply interested in the career of an ambitious young man—a man who had every excuse for being shallow and idle, and yet was neither.

"If Roderick were only like him there would be nothing wanting in my life," she thought regretfully. "I should have felt such pride in

a husband's fame, I should have worked so gladly to assist him in his career. The driest blue-books would not have been too weary for me—the dullest drudgery of parliamentary detail would have been pleasant work, if it could have helped him in his progress to political distinctions."

One evening, when Mabel and Lord Mallow were standing in the embrasure of a window, walled in by the crowd of aristocratic nobodies and intellectual eccentricities, talking earnestly of poor Erin and her chances of ultimate happiness, the lady, almost unawares, quoted a couplet of her own which seemed peculiarly applicable to the argument.

"Whose lines are those?" Lord Mallow asked eagerly; "I never heard them before."

Mabel blushed like a schoolgirl detected in sending a valentine.

"Upon my soul," cried the Irishman, "I believe they are your own! Yes, I am sure of it. You, whose mind is so high above the common level, must sometimes express yourself in poetry. They are yours, are they not?"

"Can you keep a secret?" Lady Mabel asked shyly.

"For you? Yes, on the rack. Wild horses should not tear it out of my heart; boiling lead, falling on me drop by drop, should not extort it from me."

"The lines are mine. I have written a good deal—in verse. I am going to publish a volume, anonymously, before the season is over. It is quite a secret. No one—except mamma and papa, and Mr. Vawdrey—knows anything about it."

"How proud they — how especially proud Mr. Vawdrey must be of your genius," said Lord Mallow. "What a lucky fellow he is."

He was thinking just at that moment of Violet Tempest, to whose secret preference for Roderick Vawdrey he attributed his own rejection. And now here—where again he might have found the fair ideal of his youthful dreams—here where he might have hoped to form an alliance at once socially and politically advantageous—this young Hampshire squire was before him.

"I don't think Mr. Vawdrey is particularly interested in my poetical efforts," Lady Mabel said with assumed carelessness. "He doesn't care for poetry. He likes Byron."

"What an admirable epigram!" cried the Hibernian, to whom flattery was second nature. "I shall put that down in my commonplace book when I go home. How I wish you would honour me—but it is to ask too much, perhaps—how proud I should be if you would let me hear, or see, some of your poems."

"Would you really like——" faltered Lady Mabel.

"Like! I should deem it the highest privilege your friendship could vouchsafe."

"If I felt sure it would not bore you, I should like much to have your opinion, your candid opinion" (Lord Mallow tried to look the essence of candour) "upon some things I have written. But it would be really to impose too much upon your good-nature."

"It would be to make me the proudest, and —for that one brief hour at least—the happiest of

men," protested Lord Mallow, looking intensely sentimental.

"And you will deal frankly with me? You will not flatter? You will be as severe as an Edinburgh reviewer?"

"I will be positively brutal," said Lord Mallow. "I will try to imagine myself an elderly feminine contributor to the 'Saturday,' looking at you with vinegar gaze through a pair of spectacles, bent upon spotting every fleck and flaw in your work, and predetermined not to see anything good in it."

"Then I will trust you!" cried Lady Mabel, with a gush. "I have longed for a listener who could understand and criticise, and who would be too honourable to flatter. I will trust you, as Marguerite of Valois trusted Clement Marot."

Lord Mallow did not know anything about the French poet and his royal mistress, but he contrived to look as if he did. And, before he ran away to the House presently, he gave Lady Mabel's hand a tender little pressure, which she accepted in all good faith as a sign manual of the compact between them.

They met in the Row next morning, and Lord Mallow asked—as earnestly as if the answer involved vital issues—when he might be permitted to hear those interesting poems.

"Whenever you can spare time to listen," answered Lady Mabel, more flattered by his earnestness than by all the adulatory sugar-plums which had been showered upon her since her *début*. "If you have nothing better to do this afternoon——"

"Could I have anything better to do?"

"We won't enter upon so wide a question," said Lady Mabel, laughing prettily. "If committee-rooms and public affairs can spare you for an hour or two, come to tea with mamma at five. I'll get her to deny herself to all the rest of the world, and we can have an undisturbed hour in which you can deal severely with my poor little efforts."

Thus it happened that, in the sweet spring weather, while Roderick was on the stand at Epsom, watching the City and Suburban winner pursue his meteor course along the close-cropped

sward, Lord Mallow was sitting at ease in a flowery *fauteuil* in the Queen Anne morning-room at Kensington, sipping orange-scented tea out of eggshell porcelain, and listening to Lady Mabel's dulcet accents, as she somewhat monotonously and inexpressively rehearsed "The Tragedy of a Sceptic Soul."

The poem was long, and, sooth to say, passing dreary; and, much as he admired the Duke's daughter, there were moments when Lord Mallow felt his eyelids drooping, and heard a buzzing, as of summer insects, in his ears.

There was no point of interest in all this rhythmical meandering whereon the hapless young nobleman could fix his attention. Another minute and his sceptic soul would be wandering at ease in the flowery fields of sleep. He pulled himself together with an effort, just as the eggshell cup and saucer were slipping from his relaxing grasp. He asked the Duchess for another cup of that delicious tea. He gazed resolutely at the fair-faced maiden, whose rosy lips moved graciously, discoursing shallowest platitudes clothed in erudite

polysyllables, and then at the first pause—when Lady Mabel laid down her velvet-bound volume, and looked timidly upward for his opinion—Lord Mallow poured forth a torrent of eloquence, such as he always had in stock, and praised "The Sceptic Soul" as no poem and no poet had ever been praised before, save by Hibernian critic.

The richness, the melody, the depth, colour, brilliance, tone, variety, far-reaching thought, &c. &c. &c.

He was so grateful to Providence for having escaped falling asleep that he could have gone on for ever in this strain. But if anyone had asked Lord Mallow what "The Tragedy of a Sceptic Soul" was about, Lord Mallow would have been spun.

When a strong-minded woman is weak upon one particular point she is apt to be very weak. Lady Mabel's weakness was to fancy herself a second Browning. She had never yet enjoyed the bliss of having her own idea of herself confirmed by independent evidence. Her soul thrilled as Lord Mallow poured forth his praises; talking of

"The Book and the Ring," and "Paracelsus," and a great deal more, of which he knew very little, and seeing in the expression of Lady Mabel's eyes and mouth that he was saying exactly the right thing, and could hardly say too much.

They were *tête-à-tête* by this time, for the Duchess was sleeping frankly, her crewel-work drooping from the hands that lay idle in her lap; her second cup of tea on the table beside her, half-finished.

"I don't know how it is," she was wont to say apologetically, after these placid slumbers. "There is something in Mabel's voice that always sends me to sleep. Her tones are so musical."

"And do you really advise me to publish?" asked Lady Mabel, fluttered and happy.

"It would be a sin to keep such verses hidden from the world."

"They will be published anonymously, of course. I could not endure to be pointed at as the author of 'The Sceptic Soul.' To feel that every eye was upon me—at the opera—in the Row—everywhere! It would be too dreadful. I should be proud to know that I had influenced my age—

given a new bent to thought—but no one must be able to point at *me*."

"'Thou canst not say I did it,'" quoted Lord Mallow. "I entirely appreciate your feelings. Publicity of that sort must be revolting to a delicate mind. I should think Byron would have enjoyed life a great deal better if he had never been known as the author of 'Childe Harold.' He reduced himself to a social play-actor—and always had to pose in his particular *rôle*—the Noble Poet. If Bacon really wrote the plays we call Shakespeare's, and kept the secret all his life, he was indeed the wisest of mankind."

"You have done nothing but praise me," said Lady Mabel, after a thoughtful pause, during which she had trifled with the golden clasp of her volume; "I want you to do something more than that. I want you to advise—to tell me where I am redundant—to point out where I am weak. I want you to help me in the labour of polishing."

Lord Mallow pulled his whisker doubtfully. This was dreadful. He should have to go into particulars presently, to say what lines pleased

him best, which of the various metres into which the tragedy was broken up—like a new suburb into squares and crescents and streets—seemed to him happiest and most original.

"Can you trust me with that precious volume?" he asked. "If you can, I will spend the quiet hours of the night in pondering over its pages, and will give you the result of my meditations to-morrow."

Mabel put the book into his hand with a grateful smile.

"Pray be frank with me," she pleaded. "Praise like yours is perilous."

Lord Mallow kissed her hand this time, instead of merely pressing it, and went away radiant, with the velvet-bound book under his arm.

"She's a sweet girl," he said to himself, as he hailed a cab. "I wish she wasn't engaged to that Hampshire booby, and I wish she didn't write poetry. Hard that I should have to do the Hampshire booby's work! If I were to leave this book in a hansom now—there'd be an awful situation!"

Happily for the rising statesman, he was blest with a clever young secretary, who wrote a good many letters for him, read blue-books, got up statistics, and interviewed obtrusive visitors from the Green Isle. To this young student Lord Mallow, in strictest secrecy, confided Lady Mabel's manuscript.

"Read it carefully, Allan, while I'm at the House, and make a note of everything that's bad on one sheet of paper, and of everything that's good on another. You may just run your pencil along the margin wherever you think I might write 'divine!' 'grandly original!' 'what pathos!' or anything of that sort."

The secretary was a conscientious young man, and did his work nobly. He sat far into the small hours, ploughing through "The Sceptic Soul." It was tough work; but Mr. Allan was Scotch and dogged, and prided himself upon his critical faculty. This autopsy of a fine lady's poem was a congenial labour. He scribbled pages of criticism, went into the minutest details of style, found a great deal to blame and not much

to praise, and gave his employer a complete digest of the poem before breakfast next morning.

Lord Mallow attended the Duchess's kettledrum again that afternoon, and this time he was in no wise at sea. He handled "The Sceptic Soul" as if every line of it had been engraven on the tablet of his mind.

"See here now," he cried, turning to a pencilled margin; "I call this a remarkable passage, yet I think it might be strengthened by some trifling excisions;" and then he showed Lady Mabel how, by pruning twenty lines off a passage of thirty-one, a much finer effect might be attained.

"And you really think my thought stands out more clearly?" asked Mabel, looking regretfully at the lines through which Lord Mallow had run his pencil—some of her finest lines.

"I am sure of it. That grand idea of yours was like a star in a hazy sky. We have cleared away the fog."

Lady Mabel sighed. "To me the meaning of the whole passage seemed so obvious," she said.

"Because it was your own thought. A mother knows her own children however they are dressed."

This second tea-drinking was a very serious affair. Lord Mallow went at the poem like a professional reviewer, and criticised without mercy, yet contrived not to wound the author's vanity.

"It is because you have real genius that I venture to be brutally candid," he said, when, by those slap-dash pencil-marks of his—always with the author's consent—he had reduced the "Tragedy of the Sceptic Soul" to about one-third of its original length. "I was carried away yesterday by my first impressions; to-day I am coldly critical. I have set my heart upon your poem making a great success."

This last sentence, freely translated, might be taken to mean: "I should not like such an elegant young woman to make an utter fool of herself."

Mr. Vawdrey came in while critic and poet were at work, and was told what they were doing. He evinced no unworthy jealousy, but seemed glad that Lord Mallow should be so useful.

"It's a very fine poem," he said, "but there's too much metaphysics in it. I told Mabel so the other day. She must alter a good deal of it if she wants to be understanded of the people."

"My dear Roderick, my poem is metaphysical or it is nothing," Mabel answered pettishly.

She could bear criticism from Lord Mallow better than criticism from Roderick. After this it became an established custom for Lord Mallow to drop in every day to inspect the progress of Lady Mabel's poems in the course of their preparation for the press. The business part of the matter had been delegated to him, as much more *au fait* in such things than homely rustic Rorie. He chose the publisher and arranged the size of the volume, type, binding, initials, tail-pieces, every detail. The paper was to be thick and creamy, the type mediæval, the borders were to be printed in carmine, the initials and tail-pieces specially drawn and engraved, and as quaint as the wood-cuts in an old edition of "*Le Lutrin*." The book was to have red edges, and a smooth gray linen binding with silver lettering. It was

to be altogether a gem of typographic art, worthy of Firmin Didot.

By the end of May, Lady Mabel's poems were all in type, and there was much discussion about commas and notes of admiration, syllables too much or too little, in the flowery morning-room at Kensington, what time Roderick Vawdrey —sorely at a loss for occupation—wasted the summer hours at races or regattas within easy reach of London, or went to out-of-the-way places, to look at hunters of wonderful repute, which, on inspection, were generally disappointing.

CHAPTER V.

CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAVES.

Violet Tempest had been away from home nearly a year, and to the few old servants remaining at the Abbey House, and to the villagers who had known and loved her, it seemed as if a light had gone out.

"It's like it was after the Squire's death, when miss and her ma was away," said one gossip to another; "the world seems empty."

Mrs. Winstanley and her husband had been living as became people of some pretension to rank and fashion. They saw very little of each other, but were seen together on all fitting occasions. The morning service in the little church at Beechdale would not have seemed complete without those two figures. The faded beauty in trailing silken

draperies and diaphanous bonnet, the slim, well-dressed Captain, with his bronzed face and black whiskers. They were in everybody's idea the happiest example of married bliss. If the lady's languid loveliness had faded more within the last year or so than in the ten years that went before it, if her slow step had grown slower, her white hand more transparent, there were no keen loving eyes to mark the change.

"That affectation of valetudinarianism is growing on Mrs. Winstanley," Mrs. Scobel said one day to her husband. "It is a pity. I believe the Captain encourages it."

"She has not looked so well since Violet went away," answered the kindly parson. "It seems an unnatural thing for mother and daughter to be separated."

"I don't know that, dear. The Bible says a man should leave mother and father and cleave to his wife. Poor Violet was a discordant element in that household. Mrs. Winstanley must feel much happier now she is away."

"I can't tell how she feels," answered the Vicar doubtfully; "but she does not look so happy as she did when Violet was at home."

"The fact is she gives way too much," exclaimed active little Mrs. Scobel, who had never given way in her life. "When she has a headache she lies in bed, and has the venetian blinds kept down, just as if she were dying. No wonder she looks pale and——"

"Etiolated," said the Vicar; "perishing for want of light. But I believe it's moral sunshine that is wanted there, my dear Fanny, say what you will."

Mr. Scobel was correct in his judgment. Pamela Winstanley was a most unhappy woman—an unhappy woman without one tangible cause of complaint. True that her daughter was banished; but she was banished with the mother's full consent. Her personal extravagances had been curtailed; but she was fain to admit that the curtailment was wise, necessary, and for her own future benefit. Her husband was all kindness; and surely she could not be angry with him if he

seemed to grow younger every day—rejuvenated by regular habits and rustic life—while in her wan face the lines of care daily deepened, until it would have needed art far beyond the power of any modern Medea to conceal Time's ravages. Your modern Medeas are such poor creatures—loathsome as Horace's Canidia, but without her genius or her power.

"I am getting an old woman," sighed Mrs. Winstanley. "It is lucky I am not without resources against solitude and age."

Her resources were a tepid appreciation of modern idyllic poetry, as exemplified in the weaker poems of Tennyson, and the works of Adelaide Proctor and Jean Ingelow, a talent for embroidering conventional foliage and flowers on kitchen towelling, and for the laborious conversion of Nottingham braid into Venetian point-lace.

She had taken it into her head of late to withdraw herself altogether from society, save from such friends who liked her well enough, or were sufficiently perplexed as to the disposal of their lives, to waste an occasional hour over gossip and

orange pekoe. She had now permanently assumed that *rôle* of invalid which she had always somewhat affected.

"I am really not well enough to go to dinner-parties, Conrad," she said, when her husband politely argued against her refusal of an invitation, with just that mild entreaty which too plainly means, "I don't care a jot whether you go with me or stay at home."

"But, my dear Pamela, a little gaiety would give you a fillip."

"No, it would not, Conrad. It would worry me to go to Lady Ellangowan's in one of last season's dresses; and I quite agree with you that I must spend no more money with Theodore."

"Why not wear your black velvet?"

"Too obvious a *pis aller*. I have not enough diamonds to carry off black velvet."

"But your fine old lace—rose-point, I think you call it—surely that would carry off black velvet for once in a way."

"My dear Conrad, Lady Ellangowan knows

my rose-point by heart. She always compliments me about it—an artful way of letting me know how often she has seen it. 'Oh there is that rose-point of yours, dear Mrs. Winstanley; it is too lovely.' I know her! No, Conrad; I will not go to the Ellangowans' in a dress made last year; or in any *réchauffé* of velvet and lace. I hope I have a proper pride that would always preserve me from humiliation of that kind. Besides, I am not strong enough to go to parties. You may not believe me, Conrad, but I am really ill."

The Captain put on an unhappy look, and murmured something sympathetic: but he did not believe in the reality of his wife's ailments. She had played the invalid more or less ever since their marriage; and he had grown accustomed to the assumption as a part of his wife's daily existence—a mere idiosyncrasy, like her love of fine dress and strong tea. If at dinner she ate hardly enough for a bird, he concluded that she had spoiled her appetite at luncheon, or by the consumption of sweet biscuits and pound-cake at five

o'clock. Her refusal of all invitations to dinners and garden-parties he attributed to her folly about dress, and to that alone. Those other reasons which she put forward—of weakness, languor, low spirits—were to Captain Winstanley's mind mere disguises for temper. She had not, in her heart of hearts, forgiven him for closing Madame Theodore's account.

Thus, wilfully blind to a truth which was soon to become obvious to all the world, he let the insidious foe steal across his threshold, and guessed not how soon that dark and hidden enemy was to drive him from the hearth by which he sat, secure in self-approval and sagacious schemes for the future.

Once a week, through all the long year, there had come a dutiful letter from Violet to her mother. The letters were often brief—what could the girl find to tell in her desert island?—but they were always kind, and they were a source of comfort to the mother's empty heart. Mrs. Winstanley answered unfailingly, and her Jersey letter was one of the chief events of each week. She

was fonder of her daughter at a distance than she had ever been when they were together. "That will be something to tell Violet," she would say of any inane bit of gossip that was whispered across the afternoon teacups.

CHAPTER VI.

A FOOL'S PARADISE.

At Ashbourne preparations had already begun for the wedding in August. It was to be a wedding worthy a duke's only daughter, the well-beloved and cherished child of an adoring father and mother. Kinsfolk and old friends were coming from far and wide to assist at the ceremony, for whom temporary rooms were to be arranged in all manner of places. The Duchess's exquisite dairy was to be transformed into a bachelor dormitory. Lodges and gamekeepers' cottages were utilised. Every nook and corner in the ducal mansion would be full.

"Why not rig up a few hammocks in the nearest pine plantation?" Rorie asked, laughing, when he heard of all these doings. "One couldn't have a better place to sleep in on a sultry summer night."

There was to be a ball for the tenantry in the evening of the wedding-day, in a marquee on the lawn. The gardens were to be illuminated in a style worthy of the château of Vaux, when Fouquet was squandering a nation's revenues on lamps and fountains and venal friends. Lady Mabel protested against all this fuss.

"Dear mamma, I would so much rather have been married quietly," she said.

"My dearest, it is all your papa's doing. He is so proud of you. And then we have only one daughter; and she is not likely to be married more than once, I hope. Why should we not have all our friends round us at such a time?"

Mabel shrugged her shoulders, with an air of repugnance to all the friends and all the fuss.

"Marriage is such a solemn act of one's life," she said. "It seems dreadful that it should be performed in the midst of a gaping, indifferent crowd."

"My love, there will not be a creature present who can feel indifferent about your welfare," protested the devoted mother. "If our dear Roderick

had been a more distinguished person, your papa would have had you married in Westminster Abbey. There of course there would have been a crowd of idle spectators."

"Poor Roderick," sighed Mabel. "It is a pity he is so utterly aimless. He might have made a career for himself by this time, if he had chosen."

"He will do something by-and-by, I daresay," said the Duchess, excusingly. "You will be able to mould him as you like, pet."

"I have not found him particularly malleable hitherto," said Mabel.

The bride elect was out of spirits, and inclined to look despondently upon life. She was suffering the bitter pain of disappointed hopes. "The Tragedy of a Sceptic Soul," despite its depth of thought, its exquisite typography and vellumlike paper, had been a dire and irredeemable failure. The reviewers had ground the poor little aristocratic butterfly to powder upon the wheel of ridicule. They had anatomised Lady Mabel's involved sentences, and laughed at her erudite

phrases. Her mild adaptations of Greek thought and fancy had been found out, and held up to contempt. Her petty plagiarisms from French and German poets had been traced to their source. The whole work, so smooth and neatly polished on the outside, had been turned the seamy side without, and the knots and flaws and ravelled threads had been exposed without pity.

Happily the book was anonymous: but Mabel writhed under the criticism. There was the crushing disappointment of expectations that had soared high as the topmost throne on Parnassus. She had a long way to descend. And then there was the sickening certainty that in the eyes of her own small circle she had made herself ridiculous. Her mother took those cruel reviews to heart, and wept over them. The Duke, a coarse-minded man, at best, with a soul hardly above guano and chemical composts, laughed aloud at his poor little girl's failure.

"It's a sad disappointment, I daresay," he said; "but never mind, my pet, you'll do better

next time, I've no doubt. Or if you don't, it doesn't much matter. Other people have fancied themselves poets, and have been deceived, before to-day."

"Those horrid reviewers don't understand her poetry," protested the Duchess, who would have been hard pushed to comprehend it herself, but who thought it was a critic's business to understand everything.

"I'm afraid I have written above their heads," Lady Mabel said piteously.

Roderick Vawdrey was worst of all.

"Didn't I tell you 'The Sceptic Soul' was too fine for ordinary intellects, Mab?" he said. "You lost yourself in an ocean of obscurity. You knew what you meant, but there's no man alive who could follow you. You ought to have remembered Voltaire's definition of a metaphysical discussion, a conversation in which the man who is talked to doesn't understand the man who talks, and the man who talks doesn't understand himself. You must take a simpler subject and use plainer English if you want to please the multitude."

Mabel had told her lover before that she did not aspire to please the multitude, that she would have esteemed such cheap and tawdry success a humiliating failure. It was almost better not to be read at all than to be appreciated only by the average Mudie subscriber. But she would have liked someone to read her poems. She would have liked critics to praise and understand her. She would have liked to have her own small world of admirers, an esoteric few, the salt of the earth, literary Essenes, holding themselves apart from the vulgar herd. It was dreadful to find herself on a height as lonely as one of those plateaux in the Tyrolean Alps where the cattle crop a scanty herbage in summer, and where the Ice King reigns alone through the long winter.

"You are mistaken, Roderick," Mabel said with chilling dignity; "I have friends who can understand and admire my poetry, incomprehensible and uninteresting as it may be to you."

"Dear Mabel, I never said it was uninteresting," Roderick cried humbly; "everything you do must be interesting to me. But I frankly

own I do not understand your verses as clearly as I think all verse should be understood. Why should I keep all my frankness till after the first of August? Why should the lover be less sincere than the husband? I will be truthful even at the risk of offending you."

"Pray do," cried Mabel, with ill-suppressed irritation. "Sincerity is such a delightful thing. No doubt my critics are sincere. They give me the honest undisguised truth."

Rorie saw that his betrothed's literary failure was a subject to be carefully avoided in future.

"My poor Vixen," he said to himself, with oh! what deep regret, "perhaps it was not one of the least of your charms that you never wrote poetry."

Lord Mallow was coming to Ashbourne for the fortnight before the wedding. He had made himself wondrously agreeable to the Duke, and the Duke had invited him. The House would be up by that time. It was a delightful season for the Forest. The heather would be in bloom on all the open heights, the glades of Mark Ash would

be a solemn world of greenery and shadow, a delicious place for picnics, flirtation, and gipsy tea-drinkings. Lord Mallow had only seen the Forest in the winter. It would be a grand opportunity for him.

He came, and Lady Mabel received him with a sad sweet smile. The reviews had all appeared by this time: and, except in the *West Dulmarsh Gazette* and the *Ratcliff Highway Register*, there had not been one favourable notice.

"There is a dreadful unanimity about my critics, is there not?" said the stricken poetess, when she and Lord Mallow found themselves alone together in one of the orchid-houses, breathing a perfumed atmosphere at eighty degrees, vaporous, balmy, slumberous.

"You have made a tremendous mistake, Lady Mabel," said Lord Mallow.

"How do you mean?"

"You have given the world your great book without first educating your public to receive and understand it. If Browning had done the same thing—if Browning had burst at once upon the

world with 'The Ring and the Book' he would have been as great a failure as—as—you at present imagine yourself to be. You should have sent forth something smaller. You should have made the reading world familiar with a style, too original, and of too large a power and scope, to please quickly. A volume of ballads and idyls—a short story in simple verse—would have prepared the way for your dramatic poem. Suppose Goethe had begun his literary career with the second part of 'Faust'! He was too wise for that, and wrote himself into popularity with a claptrap novel."

"I could not write a claptrap novel, or claptrap verses," sighed Lady Mabel. "If I cannot soar above the clouds, I will never spread my poor little wings again."

"Then you must be content to accept your failure as an evidence of the tendencies of an essentially Philistine age—an age in which people admire Brown, and Jones, and Robinson."

Here Lord Mallow gave a string of names, sacrificing the most famous reputations of the age to Mabel Ashbourne's vanity.

This brief conversation in the orchid-house was the first healing balm that had been applied to the bleeding heart of the poetess. She was deeply grateful to Lord Mallow. This was indeed sympathy. How different from Roderick's clumsy advice and obtrusive affectation of candour. Mabel determined that she would do her best to make Lord Mallow's visit pleasant. She gave him a good deal of her society, in fact all she could spare from Roderick, who was not an exacting lover. They were so soon to be married that really there was no occasion for them to be greedy of *tête-à-tête* companionship. They would have enough of each other's company among the Norwegian fjords.

Lord Mallow did not care about riding under an almost tropical sun, nor did he care to expose his horse to the exasperating attacks of forest-flies; so he went about with the Duchess and her daughter in Lady Mabel's pony-carriage—he saw schools and cottages—and told the two ladies all the grand things he meant to do on his Irish estate when he had leisure to do them.

"You must wait till you are married," said the

Duchess good-naturedly. "Ladies understand these details so much better than gentlemen. Mabel more than half planned those cottages you admired just now. She took the drawings out of the architect's hands, and altered them according to her own taste."

"And, as a natural result, the cottages are perfection!" exclaimed Lord Mallow.

That visit to Ashbourne was one of the most memorable periods in Lord Mallow's life. He was an impressible young man, and he had been unconsciously falling deeper in love with Lady Mabel every day during the last three months. Her delicate beauty, her culture, her elegance, her rank, all charmed and fascinated him; but her sympathy with Erin was irresistible. It was not the first time that he had been in love, by a great many times. The list of the idols he had worshipped stretched backward to the dim remoteness of boyhood. But to-day, awakening all at once to a keen perception of his hapless state, he told himself that he had never loved before as he loved now.

He had been hard hit by Miss Tempest. Yes,

he acknowledged that past weakness. He had thought her fairest and most delightful among women, and he had left the Abbey House dejected and undone. But he had quickly recovered from the brief fever: and now, reverentially admiring Lady Mabel's prim propriety, he wondered that he could have ever seriously offered himself to a girl of Vixen's undisciplined and unbroken character.

"I should have been a miserable man by this time if she had accepted me," he thought. "She did not care a straw about the People of Ireland."

He was deeply, hopelessly, irrecoverably in love; and the lady he loved was to be married to another man in less than a week. The situation was too awful. What could such a woman as Mabel Ashbourne see in such a man as Roderick Vawdrey? That is a kind of question which has been asked very often in the history of men and women. Lord Mallow could find no satisfactory answer thereto. Mr. Vawdrey was well enough in his way—he was good-looking, sufficiently well-bred; he rode well, was a first-rate shot, and could give an average player odds at billiards. Surely these were small

claims to the love of a tenth muse, a rarely accomplished and perfect woman. If Lord Mallow, in his heart of hearts, thought no great things of Lady Mabel's poetic effusions, he not the less respected her for the effort, the high-souled endeavour. A woman who could read Euripides, who knew all that was best in modern literature, was a woman for a husband to be proud of.

In this desperate and for the most part unsuspected condition of mind, Lord Mallow hung upon Lady Mabel's footsteps during the days immediately before the wedding. Roderick was superintending the alterations at Briarwood, which were being carried on upon rather an extravagant scale, to make the mansion worthy of the bride. Lord Mallow was always at hand, in the orchid-houses, carrying scissors and adjusting the hose, in the library, in the gardens, in the boudoir. He was drinking greedily of the sweet poison. This fool's paradise of a few days must end in darkness, desolation, despair—everything dreadful beginning with *d*; but the paradise was so delicious an abode that although an angel with a flaming sword, in the

shape of conscience, was always standing at the gate, Lord Mallow would not be thrust out. He remained; in defiance of conscience, and honour, and all those good sentiments that should have counselled his speedy departure.

CHAPTER VII.

"IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

"THEY are the most curious pair of lovers I ever saw in my life," said one of the visitors at Ashbourne, a young lady who had been engaged to be married more than once, and might fairly consider herself an authority upon such matters. "One never sees them together."

"They are cousins," replied her companion. "What can you expect from a courtship between cousins? It must be the most humdrum affair possible."

"All courtships are humdrum, unless there is opposition from parents, or something out of the common order to enliven them," said somebody else.

The speakers were a party of young ladies, who were getting through an idle hour after breakfast in the billiard-room.

"Lady Mabel is just the sort of girl no man could be desperately in love with," said another. "She is very pretty, and elegant, and accomplished, and all that kind of thing—but she is so overpoweringly well satisfied with herself that it seems superfluous for anyone to admire her."

"In spite of that I know of someone in this house who does immensely admire her," asserted the young lady who had spoken first. "Much more than I should approve if I were Mr. Vawdrey."

"I think I know——" began somebody, and then abruptly remarked: "What a too ridiculous stroke! And I really thought I was going to make a cannon."

This sudden change in the current of the talk was due to the appearance of the subject of this friendly disquisition. Lady Mabel had that moment entered, followed by Lord Mallow, not intent on billiards, like the frivolous damsels assembled round the table. There were bookcases all along one side of the billiard-room, containing the surplus books that had overrun the shelves in the library; and Mabel had come to look for a

particular volume among these. It was a treatise upon the antiquities of Ireland. Lord Mallow and Lady Mabel had been disputing about the Round Towers.

"Of course you are right," said the Irishman, when she had triumphantly exhibited a page which supported her side of the argument. "What a wonderful memory you have! What a wife you would make for a statesman! You would be worth half-a-dozen secretaries!"

Mabel blushed, and smiled faintly, with lowered eyelids.

"Do you remember that concluding picture in 'My Novel,'" she asked, "where Violante tempts Harley Lestrange from his idle musing over Horace, to toil through blue-books; and, when she is stealing softly from the room, he detains her and bids her copy an extract for him? 'Do you think I would go through this labour,' he says, 'if you were not to halve the success? Halve the labour as well.' I have always envied Violante that moment in her life."

"And who would not envy Harley such a wife

as Violante," returned Lord Mallow, "if she was like—the woman I picture her?"

Three hours later Lord Mallow and Lady Mabel met by accident in the garden. It was an afternoon of breathless heat and golden sunlight, the blue ether without a cloud—a day on which the most restless spirit might be content to yield to the drowsiness of the atmosphere, and lie at ease upon the sunburnt grass and bask in the glory of summer. Lord Mallow had never felt so idle, in the whole course of his vigorous young life.

"I don't know what has come to me," he said to himself; "I can't settle to any kind of work; and I don't care a straw for going sight-seeing with a pack of nonentities."

A party had gone off in a drag, soon after breakfast, to see some distant ruins; and Lord Mallow had refused to be of that party, though it included some of the prettiest girls at Ashbourne. He had stayed at home, on pretence of writing important letters, but had not, so far, penned a line. "It must be the weather," said Lord Mallow.

An hour or so after luncheon he strolled out

into the gardens, having given up all idea of writing those letters. There was a wide lawn, that sloped from the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, a lawn encircled by a belt of carefully-chosen timber. It was not very old timber, but it was sufficiently umbrageous. There were tulip-trees, and copper-beeches, and Douglas pines, and deodoras. There were shrubs of every kind, and winding paths under the trees, and rustic benches here and there to repose the wearied traveller.

On one of these benches, placed in a delicious spot, shaded by a group of pines, commanding the wide view of valley and distant hill far away towards Ringwood, Lord Mallow found Lady Mabel seated reading. She was looking delightfully cool amidst the sultry heat of the scene, perfectly dressed in soft white muslin, with much adornment of delicate lace and pale-hued ribbon: but she was not looking happy. She was gazing at the open volume on her knee, with fixed and dreamy eyes that saw not the page; and as Lord Mallow came very near, with steps that made no sound on the

fallen pine-needles, he saw that there were tears upon her drooping eyelids.

There are moments in every man's life when impulse is stronger than discretion. Lord Mallow gave the reins to impulse now, and seated himself by Lady Mabel's side, and took her hand in his, with an air of sympathy so real that the lady forgot to be offended.

"Forgive me for having surprised your tears," he murmured gently.

"I am very foolish," she said, blushing deeply as she became aware of the hand clasping hers, and suddenly withdrawing her own; "but there are passages of Dante that are too pathetic."

"Oh, it was Dante!" exclaimed Lord Mallow, with a disappointed air.

He looked down at the page on her lap.

"Yes, naturally."

She had been reading about Paolo and Francesca—that one episode, in all the catalogue of sin and sorrow, which melts every heart; a page at which the volume seems to open of its own accord.

Lord Mallow leaned down and read the lines in

a low voice, slowly, with considerable feeling; and then he looked softly up at Mabel Ashbourne, and at the landscape lying below them, in all the glow and glory of the summer light, and looked back to the lady, with his hand still on the book.

The strangeness of the situation: they two alone in the garden, unseen, unheard by human eye or ear; the open book between them—a subtle bond of union—hinting at forbidden passion.

"They were deeply to be pitied," said Lord Mallow, meaning the guilty lovers.

"It was very sad," murmured Lady Mabel.

"But they were neither the first nor the last who have found out too late that they were created to be happy in each other's love, and had by an accident missed that supreme chance of happiness," said Lord Mallow, with veiled intention.

Mabel sighed, and took the book from the gentleman's hand, and drew a little farther off on the bench. She was not the kind of young woman to yield tremblingly to the first whisper of an unauthorised love. It was all very well to admire Francesca, upon strictly æsthetic grounds, as the

perfection of erring womanhood, beautiful even in her guilt. Francesca had lived so long ago—in days so entirely mediæval, that one could afford to regard her with indulgent pity. But it was not to be supposed that a modern duke's daughter was going to follow that unfortunate young woman's example, and break plighted vows. Betrothal, in the eyes of so exalted a moralist as Lady Mabel, was a tie but one degree less sacred than marriage.

"Why did you not go to see the ruins?" she asked, resuming her society tone.

"Because I was in a humour in which ruins would have been unutterably odious. Indeed, Lady Mabel, I am just now very much of Macbeth's temper, when he began to be a-weary of the sun."

"Has the result of the session disappointed you?"

"Naturally. When was that ever otherwise? Parliament opens full of promise, like a young king who has just ascended the throne, and everybody is to be made happy; all burdens are to be lightened, the seeds of all good things that have been hidden deep in earth through the slow centuries are to

germinate all at once, and blossom, and bear fruit. And the session comes to an end; and, lo! a great many good things have been talked about, and no good thing has been done. That is in the nature of things. No, Lady Mabel, it is not that which makes me unhappy."

He waited for her to ask him what his trouble was, but she kept silence.

"No," he repeated, "it is not that."

Again there was no reply; and he went on awkwardly, like an actor who has missed his cue.

"Since I have known you I have been at once too happy and too wretched. Happy—unspeakably happy in your society; miserable in the knowledge that I could never be more to you than an unit in the crowd."

"You were a great deal more to me than that," said Mabel softly. She had been on her guard against him just now, but when he thus abased himself before her she took pity upon him, and became dangerously amiable. "I shall never forget your kindness about those wretched verses."

"I will not hear you speak ill of them," cried

Lord Mallow indignantly. "You have but shared the common fate of genius, in having a mind in advance of your age."

Lady Mabel breathed a gentle sigh of resignation.

"I am not so weak as to think myself a genius," she murmured; "but I venture to hope my poor verses will be better understood twenty years hence than they are now."

"Undoubtedly!" cried Lord Mallow, with conviction. "Look at Wordsworth; in his lifetime the general reading public considered him a prosy old gentleman, who twaddled pleasantly about lakes and mountains, and pretty little peasant girls. The world only awakened ten years ago to the fact of his being a great poet and a sublime philosopher; and I shouldn't be very much surprised," added Lord Mallow meditatively, "if in ten years more the world were to go to sleep again and forget him."

Lady Mabel looked at her watch.

"I think I will go in and give mamma her afternoon cup of tea," she said.

"Don't go yet," pleaded Lord Mallow, "it is only four, and I know the Duchess does not take tea till five. Give me one of your last hours. A lady who is just going to be married is something like Socrates after his sentence. Her friends surround her; she is in their midst, smiling, serene, diffusing sweetness and light; but they know she is going from them—they are to lose her, yes, to lose her almost as utterly as if she were doomed to die."

"That is taking a very dismal view of marriage," said Mabel, pale, and trifling nervously with her watch-chain.

This was the first time Lord Mallow had spoken to her of the approaching event.

"Is it not like death? Does it not bring change and parting to old friends? When you are Lady Mabel Vawdrey, can I ever be with you as I am now? You will have new interests, you will be shut in by a network of new ties. I shall come some morning to see you amidst your new surroundings, and shall find a stranger. My Lady Mabel will be dead and buried."

There is no knowing how long Lord Mallow might have meandered on in this dismal strain, if he had not been seasonably interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Vawdrey, who came sauntering along the winding shrubbery-walk, with his favourite pointer Hecate at his heels. He advanced towards his betrothed at the leisurely pace of a man whose courtship is over, whose fate is sealed, and from whom society exacts nothing further, except a decent compliance with the arrangements other people make for him.

He seemed in no wise disconcerted at finding his sweetheart and Lord Mallow seated side by side, alone, in that romantic and solitary spot. He pressed Mabel's hand kindly, and gave the Irishman a friendly nod.

"What have you been doing with yourself all the morning, Roderick?" asked Lady Mabel, with that half-reproachful air which is almost the normal expression of a betrothed young lady in her converse with her lover.

"Oh, pottering about at Briarwood. The workmen are such fools. I am making some slight

alterations in the stables, on a plan of my own—putting in mangers, and racks, and pillars, and partitions, from the St. Pancras Ironworks, making sanitary improvements and so on—and I have to contend with so much idiocy in our local workmen. If I did not stand by and see drain-pipes put in and connections made, I believe the whole thing would go wrong."

"It must be very dreadful for you," exclaimed Lady Mabel.

"It must be intolerable!" cried Lord Mallow; "what, when the moments are golden, when 'Love takes up the glass of Time, and turns it in his glowing hands,' when 'Love takes up the harp of life, and smites on all the chords with might,' you have to devote your morning to watching the laying of drain-pipes and digging of sewers! I cannot imagine a more afflicted man."

Lady Mabel saw the sneer, but her betrothed calmly ignored it.

"Of course it's a nuisance," he said carelessly; "but I had rather be my own clerk of the works than have the whole thing botched. I thought

you were going to Wellbrook Abbey with the house party, Mabel?"

"I know every stone of the Abbey by heart. No, I have been dawdling about the grounds all the afternoon. It is much too warm for riding or driving."

Lady Mabel strangled an incipient yawn. She had not yawned once in all her talk with Lord Mallow. Rorie stifled another, and Lord Mallow walked up and down among the pine-needles, like a caged lion. It would have been polite to leave the lovers to themselves, perhaps. They might have family matters to discuss, settlements, wedding presents, Heaven knows what. But Lord Mallow was not going to leave them alone. He was in a savage humour, in which the petty rules and regulations of a traditionary etiquette were as nothing to him. So he stayed, pacing restlessly, with his hands in his pockets, and inwardly delighted at the stupid spectacle presented by the affianced lovers, who had nothing to say to each other, and were evidently bored to the last degree by their own society.

"This is the deplorable result of trying to ferment the small beer of cousinly affection into the Maronean wine of passionate love," thought Lord Mallow. "Idiotic parents have imagined that these two people ought to marry, because they were brought up together, and the little girl took kindly to the little boy. What little girl does not take kindly to anything in the shape of a boy, when they are both in the nursery? Hence these tears."

"I am going to pour out mamma's tea," Lady Mabel said presently, keenly sensible of the stupidity of her position. "Will you come, Roderick? Mamma will be glad to know that you are alive. She was wondering about you all the time we were at luncheon."

"I ought not to have been off duty so long," Mr. Vawdrey answered meekly; "but if you could only imagine the stupidity of those bricklayers! The day before yesterday I found half-a-dozen stalwart fellows sitting upon a wall, with their hands in their corduroy pockets, smoking short pipes, and, I believe, talking politics. They pre-

tended to be at a standstill because their satellites —their *âmes damnées,* the men who hold their hods and mix their mortar—had not turned up. 'Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen,' I said. 'There's nothing like taking things easy. It's a time-job. I'll send you the morning papers and a can of beer.' And so I did, and since that day, do you know, the fellows have worked twice as hard. They don't mind being bullied; but they can't stand chaff."

"What an interesting bit of character," said Lady Mabel, with a faintly perceptible sneer. "Worthy of Henri Constant."

"May I come to the Duchess's kettledrum?" asked Lord Mallow humbly.

"By all means," answered Mabel. "How fond you gentlemen pretend to be of afternoon tea, nowadays. But I don't believe it is the tea you really care for. It is the gossip you all like. Darwin has found out that the male sex is the vain sex: but I don't think he has gone so far as to discover another great truth. It is the superior sex for whom scandal has the keenest charm."

"I have never heard the faintest hiss of the serpent slander at the Duchess's tea-table," said Lord Mallow.

"No; we are dreadfully behind the age," assented Lady Mabel. "We contrive to exist without thinking ill of our neighbours."

They all three sauntered towards the house, choosing the sheltered ways, and skirting the broad sunny lawn, whose velvet sward, green even in this tropical July, was the result of the latest improvements in cultivation, ranging from such simple stimulants as bone-dust and wood-ashes to the last development of agricultural chemistry. Lady Mabel and her companions were for the most part silent during this leisurely walk home, and, when one of them hazarded an observation, the attempt at conversation had a forced air, and failed to call forth any responsive brilliancy in the others.

The Duchess looked provokingly cool and comfortable in her morning-room, which was an airy apartment on the first-floor, with a wide window opening upon a rustic balcony, verandahed and trellised, garlanded with passion-flowers and Austra-

lian clematis, and altogether sheltered from sun and wind. The most reposeful sofas, the roomiest arm-chairs in all the house were to be found here, covered with a cool shining chintz of the good old-fashioned sort, apple-blossoms and spring-flowers on a white ground.

A second window in a corner opened into a small fernery, in which there was a miniature waterfall that trickled with a slumberous sound over moss-grown rockwork. There could hardly have been a better room for afternoon tea on a sultry summer day; and afternoon tea at Ashbourne included iced coffee, and the finest peaches and nectarines that were grown in the county; and when the Duke happened to drop in for a chat with his wife and daughter, sometimes went as far as sherry and Angustura bitters.

The Duchess received her daughter with her usual delighted air, as if the ethereal-looking young lady in India muslin had verily been a goddess.

"I hope you have not been fatiguing yourself in the orchid-houses on such an afternoon as this, my pet," she said anxiously.

"No, indeed, mamma; it is much too warm for the orchid-houses. I have been in the shrubbery reading, or trying to read, but it is dreadfully sleepy weather. We shall all be glad to get some tea. Oh, here it comes."

A match pair of footmen brought a pair of silver trays: caddy, kettle, and teapot, and cups and saucers on one; and a lavish pile of fruit, such as Lance would have loved to paint, on the other.

Lady Mabel took up the quaint little silver caddy and made the tea. Roderick began to eat peaches. Lord Mallow, true to his nationality, seated himself by the Duchess, and paid her a compliment.

"There are some more parcels for you, Mabel," said the fond mother presently, glancing at a side-table, where sundry neatly-papered packets suggested jewellery.

"More presents, I suppose," the young lady murmured languidly. "Now I do hope people have not sent me any more jewellery. I wear so little, and I——"

Have so much, she was going to say, but checked herself on the verge of a remark that savoured of vulgar arrogance.

She went on with the tea-making, uncurious as to the inside of those dainty-looking parcels. She had been surfeited with presents before she left her nursery. A bracelet or a locket more or less could not make the slightest difference in her feelings. She entertained a condescending pity for the foolish people who squandered their money in buying her such things, when they ought to know that she had a superfluity of much finer jewels than any they could give her.

"Don't you want to see your presents?" asked Rorie, looking at her, in half-stupid wonder at such calm superiority.

"They will keep till we have done tea. I can guess pretty well what they are like. How many church-services have people sent me, mamma?"

"I think the last made fourteen," murmured the Duchess, trifling with her tea-spoon.

"And how many 'Christian Years'?"

"Nine."

"And how many copies of Doré's 'Idylls of the King'?"

"One came this morning from Mrs. Scobel. I think it was the fifth."

"How many lockets inscribed with A. E. I. or 'Mizpah'?"

"My darling, I could not possibly count those. There were three more by post this morning."

"You see there is rather a sameness in these things," said Lady Mabel; "and you can understand why I am not rabidly curious about the contents of those parcels. I feel sure there will be another 'Mizpah' among them."

She had received Lord Mallow's tribute, an Irish jaunting-car, built upon the newest lines, and altogether a most perfect vehicle for driving to a meet in, so light and perfectly balanced as to travel safely through the ruttiest glade in Mark Ash.

Rorie's gifts had all been given, so Lady Mabel could afford to make light of the unopened parcels without fear of wounding the feelings of anyone present.

They were opened by-and-by, when the Duke came in from his farm, sorely disturbed in his mind at the serious indisposition of a six-hundred-guinea cart-horse, which hapless prize animal had been fatted to such an inflammatory condition that in his case the commonest ailment might prove deadly. Depressed by this calamity, the Duke required to be propped up with sherry and Angustura bitters, which tonic mixture was presently brought to him by one of the match footmen, who looked very much as if he were suffering from the same plethoric state that was likely to prove fatal to the cart-horse. Happily, the footman's death would be but a temporary inconvenience. The Duke had not given six hundred guineas for him.

Lady Mabel opened her parcels, in the hope of distracting her father from the contemplation of his trouble.

"From whom can this be," she asked wonderingly, "with the Jersey post-mark? Do I know anyone in Jersey?"

Roderick grew suddenly crimson, and became

deeply absorbed in the business of peeling a nectarine.

"I surely cannot know anyone in Jersey," said Lady Mabel, in languid wonderment. "It is an altogether impossible place. Nobody in society goes there. It sounds almost as disreputable as Boulogne."

"You'd better open the packet," said Rorie, with a quiver in his voice.

"Perhaps it is from some of your friends," speculated Mabel.

She broke the seal, and tore the cover off a small morocco case.

"What a lovely pair of earrings!" she exclaimed.

Each eardrop was a single turquoise, almost as large, and quite as clear in colour, as a hedge-sparrow's egg. The setting was Roman, exquisitely artistic.

"Now I can forgive anyone for sending me such jewellery as that," said Lady Mabel. "It is not the sort of thing one sees in every jeweller's shop."

Rorie looked at the blue stones with rueful eyes. He knew them well. He had seen them contrasted with ruddy chestnut hair, and the whitest skin in Christendom—or at any rate the whitest he had ever seen, and a man's world can be but the world he knows.

"There is a letter," said Lady Mabel. "Now I shall find out all about my mysterious Jersey friend."

She read the letter aloud.

"Les Tourelles, Jersey, July 25th.

"DEAR LADY MABEL,—I cannot bear that your wedding-day should go by without bringing you some small token of regard from your husband's old friend. Will you wear these earrings now and then, and believe that they come from one who has nothing but good wishes for Rorie's wife?—Yours very truly,

"VIOLET TEMPEST."

"Why, they are actually from your old playfellow!" cried Mabel, with a laugh that had not quite a genuine ring in its mirth. "The young

lady who used to follow the staghounds, in a green habit with brass buttons, ever so many years ago, and who insisted on calling you Rorie. She does it still, you see. How very sweet of her to send me a wedding present. I ought to have remembered. I heard something about her being sent off to Jersey by her people, because she had grown rather incorrigible at home."

"She was not incorrigible, and she was not sent off to Jersey," said Roderick grimly. "She left home of her own free will; because she could not hit it with her stepfather."

"That is another way of expressing it, but I think we both mean pretty much the same thing," retorted Mabel. "But I don't want to know why she went to Jersey. She has behaved very sweetly in sending me such a pretty letter; and when she is at home again I shall be very happy to see her at my garden-parties."

Lord Mallow had no share in this conversation, for the Duke had buttonholed him, and was giving him a detailed account of the cart-horse's symptoms.

The little party dispersed soon after this, and did not foregather again until just before dinner, when the people who had been to see the ruins were all assembled, full of their day's enjoyment, and of sundry conversational encounters which they had had with the natives of the district. They gave themselves the usual airs which people who have been laboriously amusing themselves inflict upon those wiser individuals who prefer the passive pleasures of repose, and made a merit of having exposed themselves to the meridian sun, in the pursuit of archæological knowledge.

Lady Mabel looked pale and weary all that evening. Roderick was so evidently distrait that the good-natured Duke thought that he must be worrying himself about the cart-horse, and begged him to make his mind easy, as it was possible the animal might even yet recover.

Later on in the evening Lady Mabel and Lord Mallow sat in the conservatory and talked Irish politics, while Rorie and the younger members of the house party played Nap. The conservatory was deliciously cool on this summer evening,

dimly lighted by lamps that were half hidden among the palms and orange-trees. Lady Mabel and her companion could see the stars shining through the open doorway, and the mystical darkness of remote woods. Their voices were hushed; there were pauses of silence in their talk. Never had the stirring question of Home Rule been more interesting.

Lady Mabel did not go back to the drawing-room that evening. There was a door leading from the conservatory to the hall; and, while Rorie and the young people were still somewhat noisily engaged in the game of Napoleon, Lady Mabel went out to the hall with Lord Mallow in attendance upon her. When he had taken her candle from the table and lighted it, he paused for a moment or so before he handed it to her, looking at her very earnestly all the while, as she stood at the foot of the staircase, with saddened face and downcast eyes, gravely contemplative of the stair-carpet.

"Is it—positively—too late?" he asked.

"You must feel and know that it is so," she answered.

"But it might have been?"

"Yes," she murmured with a faint sigh, "it might have been."

He gave her the candlestick, and she went slowly upstairs, without a word of good-night. He stood in the hall, watching the slim figure as it ascended, aërial and elegant in its palely-tinted drapery.

"It might have been," he repeated to himself: and then he lighted his candle and went slowly up the staircase. He was in no humour for billiards, cigars, or noisy masculine talk to-night. Still less was he inclined to be at ease and to make merry with Roderick Vawdrey.

CHAPTER VIII.

WEDDING BELLS.

Vixen had been more than a year in the island of Jersey. She had lived her lonely and monotonous existence, and made no moan. It was a dreary exile; but it seemed to her that there was little else for her to do in life but dawdle through the long slow days, and bear the burden of living; at least until she came of age, and was independent, and could go where she pleased. Then there would be the wide world for her to wander over, instead of this sea-girdled garden of Jersey. She had reasons of her own for so quietly submitting to this joyless life. Mrs. Winstanley kept her informed of all that was doing in Hampshire, and even at the Queen Anne house at Kensington. She knew that Roderick Vawdrey's wedding-day was fixed for the first of August. Was it not better that she should be far away, hidden from her small

world; while those marriage bells were ringing across the darkening beech-woods?

Her sacrifice had not been vain. Her lover had speedily forgotten that brief madness of last midsummer, and had returned to his allegiance. There had been no cloud upon the loves of the plighted cousins—no passing gust of dissension. If there had been, Mrs. Winstanley would have known all about it. Her letters told only of harmonious feeling and perpetual sunshine.

"Lady Mabel is looking prettier than ever," she wrote, in the last week of July, "that ethereal loveliness which I so much admire. Her waist cannot be more than eighteen inches. I cannot find out who makes her dresses, but they are exquisitely becoming to her; though, for my own part, I do not think the style equal to Theodore's. But then I always supplemented Theodore's ideas with my own suggestions.

"I hear that the *trousseau* is something wonderful. The *lingerie* is in quite a new style; a special make of linen has been introduced at Bruges on

purpose for the occasion, and I have heard that the loom is to be broken and no more made. But this is perhaps exaggeration. The lace has all been made in Buckinghamshire, from patterns a hundred years old—very quaint and pretty. There is an elegant simplicity about everything, Mrs. Scobel tells me, which is very charming. The costumes for the Norwegian tour are heather-coloured waterproof cloth, with stitched borders, plain to the last degree, but with a *chic* that redeems their plainness.

"Conrad and I received an early invitation to the wedding. He will go; but I have refused, on the ground of ill-health. And, indeed, my dear Violet, this is no idle excuse. My health has been declining ever since you left us. I was always a fragile creature, as you know, even in your dear papa's time; but of late the least exertion has made me tremble like a leaf. I bear up, for Conrad's sake. He is so anxious and unhappy when he sees me suffer, and I am glad to spare him anxiety.

"Your old friend, Mr. Vawdrey, looks well and

happy, but I do not see much of him. Believe me, dear, you acted well and wisely in leaving home when you did. It would have been a dreadful thing if Lady Mabel's engagement had been broken off on account of an idle flirtation between you and Rorie. It would have left a stain upon your name for life. Girls do not think of these things. I'm afraid I flirted a little myself when I was first out, and admiration was new to me; but I married so young that I escaped some of the dangers you have had to pass through.

"Roderick is making considerable improvements and alterations at Briarwood. He is trying to make the house pretty—I fear an impossible task. There is a commonplace tone about the building that defies improvement. The orchid-houses at Ashbourne are to be taken down and removed to Briarwood. The collection has been increasing ever since Lady Jane Vawdrey's death, and is now one of the finest in England. But to my mind the taste is a most foolish one. Dear Conrad thinks me extravagant for giving sixty guineas for a dress—what might he not think if

I gave as much for a single plant? Lord Mallow is staying at Ashbourne for the wedding. His success in the House of Commons has made him quite a lion. He called and took tea with me the other day. He is very nice. Ah, my dearest Violet, what a pity you could not like him. It would have been such a splendid match for you, and would have made Conrad and me so proud and happy."

Vixen folded the letter, with a sigh. She was sitting in her favourite spot in the neglected garden, the figs ripening above her among their broad ragged leaves, and the green slopes and valleys lying beneath her—orchards and meadows and pink homesteads, under a sultry summer haze.

The daughter was not particularly alarmed by her mother's complaint of declining health. It was that old cry of "wolf," which Violet had heard ever since she could remember.

"Poor mamma!" she said to herself, with a half-pitying tenderness, "it has always been her particular vanity to fancy herself an invalid; and

yet no doctor has ever been able to find out anything amiss. She ought to be very happy now, poor dear; she has the husband of her choice, and no rebellious daughter to make the atmosphere stormy. I must write to Mrs. Scobel, and ask if mamma is really not quite so well as when I left home."

And then Vixen's thoughts wandered away to Rorie, and the alterations that were being made at Briarwood. He was preparing a bright home for his young wife, and they would be very happy together, and it would be as if Violet had never crossed his path.

"But he was fond of me, last midsummer twelvemonth," thought Vixen, half seated half reclining against a grassy bank, with her hands clasped above her head, and her open book flung aside upon the long grass, where the daisies and dandelions grew in such wild abundance. "Yes, he loved me dearly then, and would have sacrificed interest, honour, all the world for my sake. Can he forget those days, when they are thus ever present to my mind? He seemed more in

love than I: yet, a little year, and he is going to be married. Have men no memories? I do not believe that he loves Lady Mabel any better than he did a year ago, when he asked me to be his wife. But he has learnt wisdom; and he is going to keep his word, and to be owner of Briarwood and Ashbourne, and a great man in the county. I suppose it is a glorious destiny."

In these last days of July a strange restlessness had taken possession of Violet Tempest. She could not read or occupy herself in any way. Those long rambles about the island, to wild precipices looking down on peaceful bays, to furzy hills where a few scattered sheep were her sole companions, to heathery steeps that were craggy and precipitous and dangerous to climb, and so had a certain fascination for the lonely wanderer—those rambles, which had been her chief resource and solace until now, had suddenly lost their charm. She dawdled in the garden, or roamed restlessly from the garden to the orchard, from the orchard to the sloping meadow, where Miss Skipwith's solitary cow, last representative of a once well-stocked farm, browsed

in a dignified seclusion. The days were slow, and oh, how lengthy! and yet there was a fever in Vixen's blood which made it seem to her as if time were hurrying on at a breathless break-neck pace.

"The day after to-morrow he will be married," she said to herself, on the morning of the thirtieth. "By this time on the day after to-morrow, the bride will be putting on her wreath of orange-blossoms, and the church will be decorated with flowers, and there will be a flutter of expectation in all the little villages, from one end of the Forest to the other. A duke's daughter is not married every day in the year. Ah me! there will not be an earthquake, or anything to prevent the wedding, I daresay. No, I feel sure that all things are going smoothly. If there had been a hitch of any kind, mamma would have written to tell me about it."

Miss Skipwith was not a bad person to live with in a time of secret trouble such as this. She was so completely wrapped up in her grand scheme of reconciliation for all the creeds, that she

was utterly blind to any small individual tragedy that might be enacted under her nose. Those worn cheeks and haggard eyes of Vixen's attracted no attention from her as they sat opposite to each other at the sparely-furnished breakfast-table, in the searching summer light.

She had allowed Violet perfect liberty, and had been too apathetic to be unkind. Having tried her hardest to interest the girl in Swedenborg, or Luther, or Calvin, or Mahomet, or Brahma, or Confucius, and having failed ignominiously in each attempt, she had dismissed all idea of companionship with Violet from her mind, and had given her over to her own devices.

"Poor child," she said to herself, "she is not unamiable, but she is utterly mindless. What advantages she might have derived from intercourse with me, if she had possessed a receptive nature! But my highest gifts are thrown away upon her. She will go through life in lamentable ignorance of all that is of deepest import in man's past and future. She has no more intellect than Baba."

Baba was the Persian cat, the silent companion of Miss Skipwith's studious hours.

So Violet roamed in and out of the house, in this languid weather, and took up a book only to throw it down again, and went out to the court-yard to pat Argus, and strolled into the orchard and leaned listlessly against an ancient apple-tree, with her loose hair glistening in the sunshine—just as if she were posing herself for a pre-Raphaelite picture — and no one took any heed of her goings and comings.

She was supremely lonely. Even looking forward to the future—when she would be of age and well off, and free to do what she liked with her life—she could see no star of hope. Nobody wanted her. She stood quite alone, amidst a strange unfriendly world.

"Except poor old McCroke, I don't think there is a creature who cares for me; and even her love is tepid," she said to herself.

She had kept up a regular correspondence with her old governess, since she had been in Jersey, and had developed to Miss McCroke

the scheme of her future travels. They were to see everything strange and rare and beautiful, that was to be seen in the world.

"I wonder if you would much mind going to Africa?" she wrote, in one of her frank girlish letters. "There must be something new in Africa. One would get away from the beaten ways of Cockney tourists, and one would escape the dreary monotony of a *table d'hôte*. There is Egypt for us to do; and you, who are a walking encyclopædia, will be able to tell me all about the Pyramids, and Pompey's Pillar, and the Nile. If we got tired of Africa we might go to India. We shall be thoroughly independent. I know you are a good sailor; you are not like poor mamma, who used to suffer tortures in crossing the Channel."

There was a relief in writing such letters as these, foolish though they might be. That idea of distant wanderings with Miss McCroke was the one faint ray of hope offered by the future—not a

star, assuredly, but at least a farthing candle. The governess answered in her friendly matter-of-fact way. She would like much to travel with her dearest Violet. The life would be like heaven after her present drudgery in finishing the Misses Pontifex, who were stupid and supercilious. But Miss McCroke was doubtful about Africa. Such a journey would be a fearful undertaking for two unprotected females. To have a peep at Algiers and Tunis, and even to see Cairo and Alexandria, might be practicable; but anything beyond that Miss McCroke thought wild and adventurous. Had her dear Violet considered the climate, and the possibility of being taken prisoners by black people, or even devoured by lions? Miss McCroke begged her dear pupil to read Livingstone's travels and the latest reports of the Royal Geographical Society, before she gave any further thought to Africa.

The slowest hours, days the most wearisome, long nights that know not sleep, must end at last. The first of August dawned, a long streak of red light in the clear gray east. Vixen saw the first glimmer as she lay wide awake in her big old bed,

staring through the curtainless window to the far sea-line, above which the morning sky grew red.

"Hail, Rorie's wedding-day!" she cried, with a little hysterical laugh; and then she buried her face in the pillow and sobbed aloud—sobbed as she had not done till now, through all her weary exile.

There had been no earthquake; this planet we live on had not rolled backward in space; all things in life pursued their accustomed course, and time had ripened into Roderick Vawdrey's wedding-day.

"I did think *something* would happen," said Vixen piteously. "It was foolish, weak, mad to think so. But I could not believe he would marry anyone but me. I did my duty, and I tried to be brave and steadfast. But I thought something would happen."

A weak lament from the weak soul of an undisciplined girl. The red light grew and glowed redder in the east, and then the yellow sun shone through gray drifting clouds, and the new day was born. Slumber and Violet had parted company for the last week. Her mind had been too full of images; the curtain of sleep would not hide them.

Frame and mind were both alike worn out, as she lay in the broadening light, lonely, forsaken, unpitied, bearing her great sorrow, just as she must have borne the toothache, or any other corporal pain.

She rose at seven, feeling unspeakably tired, dressed herself slowly and dawdlingly, thinking of Lady Mabel. What an event her rising and dressing would be this morning—the flurried maids, the indulgent mother; the pure white garments, glistening in the tempered sunlight; the luxurious room, with its subdued colouring, its perfume of freshly-cut flowers; the dainty breakfast-tray, on a table by an open window; the shower of congratulatory letters, and the last delivery of wedding gifts. Vixen could imagine the scene, with its every detail.

And Roderick, what of him? She could not so easily picture the companion of her childhood on this fateful morning of his life. She could not imagine him happy: she dared not fancy him miserable. It was safer to make a great effort, and shut that familiar figure out of her mind altogether.

Oh, what a dismal ceremony the eight-o'clock breakfast, *tête-à-tête* with Miss Skipwith, seemed on this particular morning! Even that preoccupied lady was constrained to notice Violet's exceeding pallor.

"My dear, you are ill!" she exclaimed. "Your face is as white as a sheet of paper, and your eyes have dark rings round them."

"I am not ill, but I have been sleeping badly of late."

"My dear child, you need occupation; you want an aim. The purposeless life you are leading must result badly. Why can you not devise some pursuit to fill your idle hours? Far be it from me to interfere with your liberty; but I confess that it grieves me to see youth, and no doubt some measure of ability, so wasted. Why do you not strive to continue your education? Self-culture is the highest form of improvement. My books are at your disposal."

"Dear Miss Skipwith, your books are all theological," said Vixen wearily, "and I don't care for theology. As for my education, I am

not utterly neglecting it. I read Schiller till my eyes ache."

"One shallow German poet is not the beginning and end of education," replied Miss Skipwith. "I should like you to take larger views of woman's work in the world."

"My work in the world is to live quietly, and not to trouble anyone," said Vixen, with a sigh.

She was glad to leave Miss Skipwith to her books, and to wander out into the sunny garden, where the figs were ripening or dropping half-ripened amongst the neglected grass, and the clustering bloom of the hydrangeas was as blue as the summer sky. There had been an unbroken interval of sultry weather—no rain, no wind, no clouds—only endless sunshine.

"If it would hail, or blow, or thunder," sighed Vixen, with her hands clasped above her head, "the change might be some small relief to my feelings; but this everlasting brightness is too dreadful. What a lying world it is, and how Nature smiles at us when our hearts are aching.

Well, I suppose I ought to wish the sunshine to last till after Rorie's wedding; but I don't, I don't, I don't! If the heavens were to darken, and forked lightnings to cleave the black vault, I should dance for joy. I should hail the storm, and cry 'This is sympathy!'"

And then she flung herself face downwards on the grass and sobbed, as she had sobbed on her pillow that morning.

"It rends my heart to know we are parted for ever," she said. "Oh why did I not say Yes that night in the fir plantation? The chance of lifelong bliss was in my hand, and I let it go. It would have been less wicked to give way then, and accept my happy fate, than to suffer these evil feelings that are gnawing at my heart to-day—vain rage, cruel hatred of the innocent!"

The wedding bells must be ringing by this time. She fancied she could hear them. Yes, the summer air seemed alive with bells. North, south, east, west, all round the island, they were ringing madly, with tuneful marriage peal. They beat upon her brain. They would drive her mad. She tried

to stop her ears, but then those wedding chimes seemed ringing inside her head. She could not shut them out. She remembered how the joy-bells had haunted her ears on Rorie's twenty-first birthday—that day which had ended so bitterly, in the announcement of the engagement between the cousins. Yes, that had been her first real trouble. How well she remembered her despair and desolation that night, the rage that possessed her young soul.

"And I was little more than a child, then," she said to herself. "Surely I must have been born wicked. My dear father was living then; and even the thought of his love did not comfort me. I felt myself abandoned and alone in the world. How idiotically fond I must have been of Rorie. Ever so many years have come and gone, and I have not cured myself of this folly. What is there in him that I should care for him?"

She got up from the grass, plucked herself out of that paroxysm of mental pain which came too near lunacy, and began to walk slowly round

the garden-paths, reasoning with herself, calling womanly pride to the rescue.

"I hate myself for this weakness," she protested dumbly. "I did not think I was capable of it. When I was a child, and was taken to the dentist, did I ever whine and howl like vulgar-minded children? No; I braced myself for the ordeal, and bore the pain, as my father's child ought."

She walked quickly to the house, burst into the parlour, where Miss Skipwith was sitting at her desk, the table covered with open volumes, over which flowers of literature the student roved, beelike, collecting honey for her intellectual hive.

"Please, Miss Skipwith, will you give me some books about Buddha?" said Vixen, with an alarming suddenness. "I am quite of your opinion: I ought to study. I think I shall go in for theology."

"My dearest child!" cried the ancient damsel, enraptured. "Thank Heaven! the seed I have sown has germinated at last. If you are once inspired with the desire to enter that vast field

of knowledge, the rest will follow. The flowers you will find by the wayside will lure you onward, even when the path is stony and difficult."

"I suppose I had better begin with Buddha," said Vixen, with a hard and resolute manner that scarcely seemed like the burning desire for knowledge newly kindled in the breast of a youthful student. "That is beginning at the beginning, is it not?"

"No, my dear. In comparison with the priesthood of Egypt, Buddha is contemptibly modern. If we want the beginning of things, we must revert to Egypt, that cradle of learning and civilisation."

"Then let me begin with Egypt!" cried Vixen impatiently. "I don't care a bit how I begin. I want occupation for my mind."

"Did I not say so?" exclaimed Miss Skipwith, full of ardent welcome for the neophyte whose steps had been so tardy in approaching the shrine. "That pallor, those haggard eyes are indications of a troubled mind; and no mind can be free

from trouble when it lacks an object. We create our own sorrows."

"Yes, we are wretched creatures!" cried Vixen passionately, "the poorest examples of machinery in all this varied universe. Look at that cow in your orchard, her dull placid life, inoffensive, useful, asking nothing but a fertile meadow and a sunny day to fill her cup of happiness. Why did the great Creator make the lower animals exempt from sorrow, and give us such an infinite capacity for grief and pain? It seems hardly fair."

"My dear, our Creator gave us minds, and the power of working out our own salvation," replied Miss Skipwith. "Here are half-a-dozen volumes. In these you will find the history of Egyptian theology, from the golden age of the god Râ to the dark and troubled period of Persian invasion. Some of these works are purely philosophical. I should recommend you to read the historical volumes first. Make copious notes of what you read, and do not hesitate to refer to me when you are puzzled."

"I am afraid that will be very often," said Vixen, piling up the books in her arms with a somewhat hopeless air. "I am not at all clever; but I want to employ my mind."

She carried the books up to her bedroom, and arranged them on a stout old oak table, which Mrs. Doddery had found for her accommodation. She opened her desk, and put a quire of paper ready for any notes she might be tempted to make, and then she began, steadily and laboriously, with a dry-as-dust history of ancient Egypt.

Oh, how her poor head ached as the summer noontide wore on, and the bees hummed in the garden below, and the distant waves danced gaily in the sunlight; and the knowledge that the bells were really ringing at Ashbourne could not be driven from her mind. How the Shepherd Kings, and the Pharoahs, and the comparatively modern days of Joseph and his brethren, and the ridiculously recent era of Moses, passed, like dim shifting shadows, before her mental vision. She retraced her steps in that dreary book, again and again, patiently, forcing her mind to the uncongenial task.

"I will not be such a slave as to think of him all this long summer day," she said to herself. "I *will* think of the god Râ, and the lotus flowers, and the Red Nile, and the Green Nile, and all this wonderful land where I am going to take dear old McCroke by-and-by."

She read on till dinner-time, only pausing to scribble rapid notes of the dates and names and facts which would not stand steadily in her whirling brain: and then she went down to the parlour, no longer pale, but with two hectic spots on her cheeks, and her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Ah," ejaculated Miss Skipwith delightedly. "You look better already. There is nothing like severe study for bracing the nerves."

Violet talked about Egypt all dinner-time, but she ate hardly anything, and that hectic flush upon her cheeks grew more vivid as she talked.

"To think that after the seed lying dormant all this time, it should have germinated at last with such sudden vigour," mused Miss Skipwith. "The poor girl is talking a good deal of nonsense;

but that is only the exuberance of a newly-awakened intellect."

Vixen went back to the Egyptians directly after dinner. She toiled along the arid road with an indomitable patience. Her ideas of Egypt had hitherto been of the vaguest. Vast plains of barren sand, a pyramid or two, Memnon's head breathing wild music in the morning sunshine, crocodiles, copper-coloured natives, and Antony and Cleopatra. These things were about as much as Miss McCroke's painstaking tuition had implanted in her pupil's mind. And here, without a shadow of vocation, this poor ignorant girl was poring over the driest details that ever interested the scholar. The mysteries of the triple language, the Rosetta Stone, Champollion—*tout le long de la rivière.* Was it any wonder that her head ached almost to agony, and that the ringing of imaginary wedding bells sounded distractingly in her ears?

She worked on till tea-time, and was too engrossed to hear the bell, which clanged lustily for every meal in the orderly household: a bell

whose clamour was somewhat too much for the repast it heralded.

This evening Vixen did not hear the bell, inviting her to weak tea and bread-and-butter. The ringing of those other bells obscured the sound. She was sitting with her book before her, but her eyes fixed on vacancy, when Miss Skipwith, newly interested in her charge, came to inquire the cause of her delay. The girl looked at her languidly, and seemed slow to understand what she said.

"I don't care for any tea," she replied at last. "I would rather go on with the history. It is tremendously interesting, especially the hieroglyphics. I have been trying to make them out. It is so nice to know that a figure like a chopper means a god, and that a goose with a black ball above his back means Pharoah, son of the sun. And then the tables of dynasties: can anything be more interesting than those? It makes one's head go round just a little at first, when one has to grope backwards through so many centuries, but that's nothing."

"My dear, you are working too hard. It is foolish to begin with such impetuosity. A fire that burns so fiercely will soon exhaust itself. *Festina lente.* We must hasten slowly, if we want to make solid progress. Why, my poor child, your forehead is burning. You will read yourself into a fever."

"I think I am in a fever already," said Vixen.

Miss Skipwith was unusually kind. She insisted upon helping her charge to undress, and would not leave her till she was lying quietly in bed. She was going to draw down the blinds, but against this Vixen protested vehemently.

"Pray leave me the sky," she cried; "it is something to look at through the long blank night. The stars come and go, and the clouds are always changing. I believe I should go mad if it were not for the sky."

Poor Miss Skipwith felt seriously uneasy. The first draught from the fountain of knowledge had evidently exercised an intoxicating effect upon Violet Tempest. It was as if she had been

taking opium or hashish. The girl's brain was affected.

"You have studied too long," she said. "This must not occur again. I feel myself responsible to your parents for your health."

"To my parents," echoed Vixen, with a sudden sigh; "I have only one, and she is happier in my absence than when I was with her. You need not be uneasy about me if I fall ill. No one will care. If I were to die no one would be sorry. I have no place in the world. No one would miss me."

"My dear, it is absolutely wicked to talk in this strain; just as you are developing new powers, an intellect which may make you a pillar and a landmark in your age."

"I don't want to be a pillar or a landmark," said Vixen impatiently. "I don't want to have my name associated with 'movements,' or to write letters to *The Times*. I should like to have been happy my own way."

She turned her back upon Miss Skipwith, and lay so still that the excellent lady supposed she was dropping off to sleep.

"A good night's rest will restore her, and she will awake with renewed appetite for knowledge," she murmured benevolently, as she went back to her Swedenborgian studies.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEAREST WAY TO NORWAY.

No such blessing as a good night's rest was in store for Violet Tempest on that night of the first of August. She lay in a state of half-consciousness that was near akin to delirium. When she closed her eyes for a little while the demon of evil dreams took hold of her. She was in the old familiar home-scenes with her dear dead father. She acted over again that awful tragedy of sudden death. She was upbraiding her mother about Captain Winstanley. Bitter words were on her lips; words more bitter than even she had ever spoken in all her intensity of adverse feeling. She was in the woody hollow by Rufus's stone, blindfold, with arms stretched helplessly out, seeking for Rorie among the smooth beech-boles, with a dreadful sense of loneliness, and a fear that he was far away, and that she would perish, lost and alone, in that dismal wood.

So the slow night wore on to morning. Sometimes she lay staring idly at the stars, shining so serenely in that calm summer sky. She wondered what life was like, yonder, in those remote worlds. Was humanity's portion as sad, fate as adverse, there as here? Then she thought of Egypt, and Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra—that story of a wild, undisciplined love, grand in its lawless passion—its awful doom. To have loved thus, and died thus, seemed a higher destiny than to do right, and patiently conquer sorrow, and live on somehow to the dismal end of the dull blameless chapter.

At last, with what laggard steps, with what oppressive tardiness, came the dawn, in long streaks of lurid light above the edge of the distant waters.

"'Red sky at morning is the shepherd's warning!'" cried Vixen, with dry lips. "Thank God there will be rain to-day! Welcome change after the hot arid skies, and the cruel brazen sun, mocking all the miseries of this troubled earth."

She felt almost as wildly glad as the Ancient Mariner, at the idea of that blessed relief; and then,

by-and-by, with the changeful light shining on her face, she fell into a deep sleep.

Perhaps that morning sleep saved Vixen from an impending fever. It was the first refreshing slumber she had had for a week—a sweet dreamless sleep. The breakfast-bell rang unheeded. The rain, forecast by that red sky, fell in soft showers upon the verdant isle, and the grateful earth gave back its sweetest perfumes to the cool, moist air.

Miss Skipwith came softly in to look at her charge, saw her sleeping peacefully, and as softly retired.

"Poor child! the initiation has been too much for her unformed mind," she murmured complacently, pleased with herself for having secured a disciple. "The path is narrow and rugged at the beginning, but it will broaden out before her as she goes on."

Violet awoke, and found that it was mid-day. Oh, what a blessed relief that long morning sleep had been. She woke like a creature cured of mortal pain. She fell on her knees beside the bed,

and prayed as she had not often prayed in her brief careless life.

"What am I that I should question Thy justice!" she cried. "Lord, teach me to submit, teach me to bear my burden patiently, and to do some good in the world."

Her mood and temper were wondrously softened after a long interval of thought and prayer. She was ashamed of her waywardness of yesterday—her foolish unreasonable passion.

"Poor Rorie, I told him to keep his promise, and he has obeyed me," she said to herself. "Can I be angry with him for that? I ought to feel proud and glad that we were both strong enough to do our duty."

She dressed slowly, languid after the excitement of yesterday, and then went slowly down the broad bare staircase to Miss Skipwith's parlour.

The lady of the manor received her with affectionate greeting, and had a special pot of tea brewed for her, and insisted upon her eating some dry toast, a form of nourishment which this temperate lady deemed a panacea in illness.

"I was positively alarmed about you last night, my dear," she said; "you were so feverish and excited. You read too much, for the first day."

"I'm afraid I did," assented Vixen, with a faint smile; "and the worst of it is, I believe I have forgotten every word I read."

"Surely not!" cried Miss Skipwith, horrified at this admission. "You seemed so impressed—so interested. You were so full of your subject."

"I have a faint recollection of the little men in the hieroglyphics," said Vixen; "but all the rest is gone. The images of Antony and Cleopatra, in Shakespeare's play, bring Egypt more vividly before me than all the history I read yesterday."

Miss Skipwith looked shocked, just as if some improper character in real life had been brought before her.

"Cleopatra was very disreputable, and she was not Egyptian," she remarked severely. "I am sorry you should waste your thoughts upon such a person."

"I think she is the most interesting woman in

ancient history," said Vixen wilfully, "as Mary Queen of Scots is in modern history. It is not the good people whose images take hold of one's fancy. What a faint idea one has of Lady Jane Grey. And, in Schiller's 'Don Carlos,' I confess the Marquis of Posa never interested me half so keenly as Philip of Spain."

"My dear, you are made up of fancies and caprices. Your mind wants balance," said Miss Skipwith, affronted at this frivolity. "Had you not better go for a walk with your dog? Doddery tells me that poor Argus has not had a good run since last week."

"How wicked of me!" cried Vixen. "Poor old fellow! I had almost forgotten his existence. Yes, I should like a long walk, if you will not think me idle."

"You studied too many hours yesterday, my dear. It will do you good to relax the bow to-day. '*Non semper arcum tendit Apollo.*'"

"I'll go for my favourite walk to Mount Orgueil. I don't think there'll be any more rain. Please excuse me if I am not home in time for

dinner. I can have a little cold meat, or an egg, for my tea."

"You had better take a sandwich with you," said Miss Skipwith, with unusual thoughtfulness. "You have been eating hardly anything lately."

Vixen did not care about the sandwich, but submitted, to please her hostess, and a neat little paper parcel, containing about three ounces of nutriment, was made up for her by Mrs. Doddery. Never had the island looked fairer in its summer beauty than it looked to-day, after the morning's rain. These showers had been to Jersey what sleep had been to Vixen. The air was soft and cool; sparkling rain-drops fell like diamonds from the leaves of ash and elm. The hedge-row ferns had taken a new green, as if the spirit of spring had revisited the island. The blue bright sea was dimpled with wavelets.

What a bright glad world it was, and how great must be the sin of a rebellious spirit, cavilling at the dealings of its Creator! The happy dog bounced and bounded round his mistress, the birds twittered in the hedges, the pass-

ing farm-labourer with his cartload of seaweed smacked his whip cheerily as he urged his patient horse along the narrow lane. A huge van-load of Cockney tourists, singing a boisterous chorus to the last music-hall song, passed Vixen at a turn of the road, and made a blot on the serene beauty of the scene. They were going to eat lobsters and drink bottled beer and play skittles at Le Tac. Vixen rejoiced when their raucous voices died away on the summer breeze.

"Why is Jersey the peculiar haunt of the vulgar?" she wondered. "It is such a lovely place that it deserves to be visited by something better than the refuse of Margate and Ramsgate."

There was a meadow-path which lessened the distance between Les Tourelles and Mount Orgueil. Vixen had just left the road and entered the meadow when Argus set up a joyous bark, and ran back to salute a passing vehicle. It was a St. Helier's fly, driving at a tremendous pace in the direction from which she had come. A young man lay back in the carriage, smoking a cigar, with his hat slouched over his eyes. Vixen could

just see the strong sunburnt hand flung up above his head. It was a foolish fancy, doubtless, but that broad brown hand reminded her of Rorie's. Argus leaped the stile, rushed after the vehicle, and saluted it clamorously. The poor brute had been mewed up for a week in a dull court-yard, and was rejoiced at having something to bark at.

Vixen walked on to the seashore, and the smiling little harbour, and the brave old castle. There was the usual party of tourists following the guide through narrow passages and echoing chambers, and peering into the rooms where Charles Stuart endured his exile, and making those lively remarks and speculations whereby the average tourist is prone to reveal his hazy notions of history. Happily Vixen knew of quiet corners upon the upward walls whither tourists rarely penetrated; nooks in which she had sat through many an hour of sun and shade, reading, musing, or sketching with free untutored pencil, for the mere idle delight of the moment. Here in this loneliness, between land and sea, she had nursed her sorrow and made much of her grief.

She liked the place. No obtrusive sympathy had ever made it odious to her. Here she was mistress of herself and of her own thoughts. To-day she went to her favourite corner, a seat in an angle of the battlemented wall, and sat there with her arms folded on the stone parapet, looking dreamily seaward, across the blue channel to the still bluer coast of Normandy, where the towers of Coutance showed dimly in the distance.

Resignation. Yes, that was to be her portion henceforward. She must live out her life, in isolation almost as complete as Miss Skipwith's, without the innocent delusions which gave substance and colour to that lonely lady's existence.

"If I could only have a craze," she thought hopelessly, "some harmless monomania which would fill my mind! The maniacs in Bedlam, who fancy themselves popes or queens, are happy in their foolish way. If I could only imagine myself something which I am not — anything except poor useless Violet Tempest, who has no place in the world!"

The sun was gaining power, the air was

drowsy, the soft ripple of the tide upon the golden sand was like a lullaby. Even that long sleep of the morning had not cured Vixen's weariness. There were long arrears of slumber yet to be made up. Her eyelids drooped, then closed altogether, the ocean lullaby took a still softer sound, the distant voices of the tourists grew infinitely soothing, and Vixen sank quietly to sleep, her head leaning on her folded arms, the gentle west wind faintly stirring her loose hair.

"'Oh, happy kiss that woke thy sleep!'" cried a familiar voice close in the slumberer's ear, and then a warm breath, which was not the summer wind, fanned the cheek that lay upmost upon her arm, two warm lips were pressed against that glowing cheek in ardent greeting. The girl started to her feet, every vein tingling with the thrilling recognition of her assailant. There was no one else—none other than he—in this wide world who would do such a thing! She sprang up, and faced him, her eyes flashing, her cheeks crimson.

"How dare you?" she cried. "Then it was

you I saw in the fly? Pray, is this the nearest way to Norway?"

Yes, it was Rorie; looking exactly like the familiar Rorie of old; not one whit altered by marriage with a duke's only daughter; a stalwart young fellow in a rough gray suit, a dark face sunburnt to deepest bronze, eyes with a happy smile in them, firmly-cut lips half hidden by the thick brown beard, a face that would have looked well under a lifted helmet—such a face as the scared Saxons must have seen among the bold followers of William the Norman, when those hardy Norse warriors ran amuck in Dover town.

"Not to my knowledge," answered this audacious villain, in his lightest tone. "I am not very geographical. But I should think it was rather out of the way."

"Then you and Lady Mabel have changed your plans?" said Vixen, trembling very much, but trying desperately to be as calmly commonplace as a young lady talking to an ineligible partner at a ball. "You are not going to the north of Europe?"

"Lady Mabel and I have changed our plans. We are not going to the north of Europe."

"Oh!"

"In point of fact, we are not going anywhere."

"But you have come to Jersey. That is part of your tour, I suppose?"

"Do not be too hasty in your suppositions, Miss Tempest. *I* have come to Jersey—I am quite willing to admit as much as that."

"And Lady Mabel? She is with you, of course?"

"Not the least bit in the world. To the best of my knowledge Lady Mabel—I beg her pardon—Lady Mallow—is now on her way to the fishing-grounds of Connemara with her husband."

"Rorie!"

What a glad happy cry that was! It was like a gush of sudden music from a young blackbird's throat on a sunny spring morning. The crimson dye had faded from Violet's cheeks a minute ago and left her deadly pale. Now the bright colour rushed back again, the happy brown eyes, the

sweet blush-rose lips, broke into the gladdest smile that ever Rorie had seen upon her face. He held out his arms, he clasped her to his breast, where she rested unresistingly, infinitely happy. Great Heaven! how the whole world and herself had become transformed in this moment of unspeakable bliss! Rorie, the lost, the surrendered, was her own true lover after all!

"Yes, dear, I obeyed you. You were hard and cruel to me that night in the fir plantation; but I knew in my heart of hearts that you were wise, and honest, and true; and I made up my mind that I would keep the engagement entered upon beside my mother's death-bed. Loving or unloving I would marry Mabel Ashbourne, and do my duty to her, and go down to my grave with the character of a good and faithful husband, as many a man has done who never loved his wife. So I held on, Vixen —yes, I will call you by the old pet name now: henceforward you are mine, and I shall call you what I like—I held on, and was altogether an exemplary lover; went wherever I was ordered to go, and always came when they whistled for me; rode

at my lady's jog-trot pace in the Row, stood behind her chair at the opera, endured more classical music than ever man heard before and lived, listened to my sweetheart's manuscript verses, and, in a word, did my duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call me: and my reward has been to be jilted with every circumstance of ignominy on my wedding-morning."

"Jilted!" cried Vixen, her big brown eyes shining, in pleasantest mockery. "Why I thought Lady Mabel adored you?"

"So did I," answered Roderick naïvely, "and I pitied the poor dear thing for her infatuation. Had I not thought that I should have broken my bonds long ago. It was not the love of the Duke's acres that held me. I still believe that Mabel was fond of me once, but Lord Mallow bowled me out. His eloquence, his parliamentary success, and above all, his flattery, proved irresistible. The scoundrel brought a marriage certificate in his pocket when he came to stay at Ashbourne, and had the art to engage rooms at Southampton and sleep there a night *en passant*. He left a portmanteau and a

hat-box there, and that constituted legal occupancy; so, when he won Lady Mabel's consent to an elopement—which I believe he did not succeed in doing till the night before our intended wedding-day—he had only to ride over to Southampton and give notice to the parson and clerk. The whole thing was done splendidly. Lady Mabel went out at eight o'clock, under the pretence of going to early church. Mallow was waiting for her with a fly, half a mile from Ashbourne. They drove to Southampton together, and were married at ten o'clock, in the old church of St. Michael. While the distracted Duchess and her women were hunting everywhere for the bride, and all the visitors at Ashbourne were arraying themselves in their wedding finery, and the village children were filling their baskets with flowers to strew upon the pathway of the happy pair, emblematical of the flowers which do *not* blossom in the highway of life, the lady was over the border with Jock o' Hazeldean! Wasn't it fun, Vixen?"

And the jilted one flung back his handsome head and laughed long and loud. It was too good

a joke, the welcome release coming at the last moment.

"At half-past ten there came a telegram from my runaway bride:

"'Ask Roderick to forgive me, dear mamma. I found at the last that my heart was not mine to give, and I am married to Lord Mallow. I do not think my cousin will grieve very much.'

"That last clause was sensible, anyhow, was it not, Vixen?"

"I think the whole business was very sensible," said Vixen, with a sweet grave smile; "Lord Mallow wanted a clever wife and you did not. It was very wise of Lady Mabel to find that out before it was too late."

"She will be very happy as Lady Mallow," said Roderick. "Mallow will legislate for Ireland, and she will rule him. He will have quite enough of Home Rule, poor beggar. Hibernia will be Mabelised. She is a dear good little thing. I quite love her, now she has jilted me."

"But how did you come here?" asked Vixen, looking up at her lover in simple wonder. "All this happened only yesterday morning."

"Is there not a steamer that leaves Southampton nightly? Had there not been one I would have chartered a boat for myself. I would have come in a cockle-shell — I would have come with a swimming-belt—I would have done anything wild and adventurous to hasten to my love. I started for Southampton the minute I had seen that too blessed telegram; went to St. Michael's, saw the register with its entry of Lord Mallow's marriage, hardly dry; and then went down to the docks and booked my berth. Oh, what a long day yesterday was—the longest day of my life!"

"And of mine," sighed Vixen, between tears and laughter, "in spite of the Shepherd Kings."

"Are those Jersey people you have picked up?" Rorie asked innocently.

This turned the scale, and Vixen burst into a joyous peal of laughter.

"How did you find me here?" she asked.

"Very easily. Your custodian—what a grim-looking personage she is, by-the-way—told me where you were gone, and directed me how to follow you. I told her I had a most important message to deliver to you from your mother. You don't mind that artless device, I hope?"

"Not much. How is dear mamma? She complains in her letters of not feeling very well."

"I have not seen her lately. When I did, I thought her looking ill and worn. She will get well when you go back to her, Vixen. Your presence will be like sunshine."

"I shall never go back to the Abbey House."

"Yes you will—for one fortnight at least. After that your home will be at Briarwood. You must be married from your father's house."

"Who said I was going to be married, sir?" asked Vixen, with delicious coquetry.

"I said it—I say it. Do you think I am too bold, darling? Ought I to go on my knees, love, and make you a formal offer? Why I have loved you all my life; and I think you have loved me as long."

"So I have, Rorie," she answered softly, shyly, sweetly. "I forswore myself that night in the fir wood. I always loved you; there was no stage of my life when you were not dearer to me than anyone on earth, except my father."

"Dear love, I am ashamed of my happiness," said Roderick tenderly. "I have been so weak and unworthy. I gave away my hopes of bliss in one foolishly soft moment, to gratify my mother's dying wish—a wish that had been dinned into my ear for the last years of her life—and I have done nothing but repent my folly ever since. Can you forgive me, Violet? I shall never forgive myself."

"Let the past be like a dream that we have dreamt. It will make the future seem so much the brighter."

"Yes."

And then under the blue August sky, fearless and unabashed, these happy lovers gave each other the kiss of betrothal.

"What am I to do with you?" Vixen asked laughingly. "I ought to go home to Les Tourelles."

"Don't you think you might take me with you? I am your young man now, you know. I hope it is not a case of 'no followers allowed.'"

"I'm afraid Miss Skipwith will feel disappointed in me. She thought I was going to have a mission."

"A mission!"

"Yes; that I was going in for theology. And for it all to end in my being engaged to be married! It seems such a commonplace ending, does it not?"

"Decidedly. As commonplace as the destiny of Adam and Eve, whom God joined together in Eden. Take me back to Les Tourelles, Vixen. I think I shall be able to manage Miss Skipwith."

They left the battlements, and descended the narrow stairs, and went side by side, through

sunlit fields and lanes, to the old Carolian manor house, happy with that unutterable, immeasurable joy which belongs to happy love, and to love only; whether it be the romantic passion of a Juliet leaning from her balcony, the holy bliss of a mother hanging over her child's cradle, or the sober affection of the wife who has seen the dawn and close of a silver wedding and yet loves on with love unchangeable—a monument of constancy in an age of easy divorce.

The distance was long; but to these two the walk was of the shortest. It was as if they trod on flowers or airy cloud, so lightly fell their footsteps on the happy earth.

What would Miss Skipwith say? Vixen laughed merrily at the image of that cheated lady.

"To think that all my Egyptian researches should end in—Antony!" she said, with a joyous look at her lover, who required to be informed which Antony she meant.

"I remember him in Plutarch," he said. "He was a jolly fellow."

"And in Shakespeare."

"*Connais pas*," said Rorie. "I've read some of Shakespeare's plays, of course, but not all. He wrote too much."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when they arrived at Les Tourelles. They had loitered a little in those sunny lanes, stopping to look seaward through a gap in the hedge, or to examine a fern which was like the ferns of Hampshire. They had such a world of lovers' nonsense to say to each other, such confessions of past unhappiness, such schemes of future bliss.

"I'm afraid you'll never like Briarwood as well as the Abbey House," said Rorie humbly. "I tried my best to patch it up for Lady Mabel; for you see, as I felt I fell short in the matter of affection, I wanted to do the right thing in furniture and decorations. But the house is lamentably modern and commonplace. I'm afraid you'll never be happy there."

"Rorie, I could be happy with you if our home were no better than the charcoal-burner's hut in Mark Ash," protested Vixen.

"It's very good of you to say that. Do you like sage-green?" Rorie asked with a doubtful air.

"Pretty well. It reminds me of mamma's dressmaker, Madame Theodore."

"Because Mabel insisted upon having sage-green curtains, and chair-covers, and a sage-green wall with a chocolate dado—did you ever hear of a dado?—in the new morning-room I built for her. I'm rather afraid you won't like it; I should have preferred pink or blue myself, and no dado. It looks so much as if one had run short of wall-paper. But it can all be altered by-and-by, if you don't like it."

They found Miss Skipwith pacing the weedy gravel walk in front of her parlour window, with a disturbed air, and a yellow envelope in her hand.

"My dear, this has been an eventful day," she exclaimed. "I have been very anxious for your return. Here is a telegram for you; and as it is the first you have had since you have been staying here, I conclude it is of some importance."

Vixen took the envelope eagerly from her hand.

"If you were not standing by my side, a telegram would frighten me," she whispered to Roderick. "It might tell me you were dead."

The telegram was from Captain Winstanley to Miss Tempest:

"Come home by the next boat. Your mother is ill, and anxious to see you. The carriage will meet you at Southampton."

Poor Vixen looked at her lover with a conscience-stricken countenance.

"Oh, Rorie, and I have been so wickedly, wildly happy!" she cried, as if it were a crime to have so rejoiced. "And I made so light of mamma's last letter, in which she complained of being ill. I hardly gave it a thought."

"I don't suppose there is anything very wrong," said Rorie, in a comforting tone, after he had studied those few bold words in the telegram, trying to squeeze the utmost meaning out of the

brief sentence. "You see, Captain Winstanley does not say that your mother is dangerously ill, or even very ill; he only says ill. That might mean something quite insignificant — hay-fever, or neuralgia, or a nervous headache."

"But he tells me to go home—he who hates me, and was so glad to get me out of the house."

"It is your mother who summons you home, no doubt. She is mistress in her own house, of course."

"You would not say that if you knew Captain Winstanley."

They were alone together on the gravel walk, Miss Skipwith having retired to make the tea in her dingy parlour. It had dawned upon her that this visitor of Miss Tempest's was no common friend; and she had judiciously left the lovers together. "Poor misguided child!" she murmured to herself pityingly; "just as she was developing a vocation for serious things! But perhaps it is all for the best. I doubt if she would ever have had breadth of mind to grapple with the great problems of natural religion."

"Isn't it dreadful?" said Vixen, walking up and down with the telegram in her hand. "I shall have to endure hours of suspense before I can know how my poor mother is. There is no boat till to-morrow morning. It's no use talking, Rorie." Mr. Vawdrey was following her up and down the walk affectionately, but not saying a word. "I feel convinced that mamma must be seriously ill; I should not be sent for unless it were so. In all her letters there has not been a word about my going home. I was not wanted."

"But, dearest love, you know that your mother is apt to think seriously of trifles."

"Rorie, you told me an hour ago that she was looking ill when last you saw her."

Roderick looked at his watch.

"There is one thing I might do," he said, musingly. "Has Miss Skipwith a horse and trap?"

"Not the least bit in the world."

"That's a pity; it would have saved time. I'll get down to St. Helier's somehow, telegraph to Captain Winstanley to inquire the exact state of

your mother's health, and not come back till I bring you his answer."

"Oh, Rorie, that would be good of you!" exclaimed Vixen. "But it seems too cruel to send you away like that; you have been travelling so long. You have had nothing to eat. You must be dreadfully tired."

"Tired! Have I not been with you? There are some people whose presence makes one unconscious of humanity's weaknesses. No, darling, I am neither tired nor hungry; I am only ineffably happy. I'll go down and set the wires in motion; and then I'll find out all about the steamer for to-morrow morning, and we will go back to Hampshire together."

And again the rejoicing lover quoted the Laureate:

> "And on her lover's arm she leant,
> And round her waist she felt it fold;
> And far across the hills they went,
> In that new world which is the old."

Rorie had to walk all the way to St. Helier's. He despatched an urgent message to Captain

Winstanley, and then dined temperately at a French restaurant not far from the quay, where the *bon vivants* of Jersey are wont to assemble nightly. When he had dined he walked about the harbour, looking at the ships, and watching the lights beginning to glimmer from the barrack-windows, and the straggling street along the shore, and the far-off beacons shining out, as the rosy sunset darkened to purple night.

He went to the office two or three times before the return message had come; but at last it was handed to him, and he read it by the office-lamp:

"*Captain Winstanley, Abbey House, Hampshire, to Mr. Vawdrey, St. Helier's.*

"My wife is seriously ill, but in no immediate danger. The doctors order extreme quiet; all agitation is to be carefully avoided. Let Miss Tempest bear this in mind when she comes home."

Roderick drove back to Les Tourelles with this message, which was in some respects reassuring,

or at any rate afforded a certainty less appalling than Violet's measureless fears.

Vixen was sitting on the pilgrim's bench beside the manor house gateway, watching for her lover's return. Oh, happy lover, to be thus watched for and thus welcomed; thrice, nay, a thousandfold happy in the certainty that she was his own for ever! He put his arm round her, and they wandered along the shadowy lane together, between dewy banks of tangled verdure, luminous with glow-worms. The stars were shining above the over-arching roof of foliage, the harvest moon was rising over the distant sea.

"What a beautiful place Jersey is!" exclaimed Vixen innocently, as she strolled lower down the lane, circled by her lover's arm. "I had no idea it was half so lovely. But then of course I was never allowed to roam about in the moon-light. And, indeed, Rorie, I think we had better go in directly. Miss Skipwith will be wondering."

"Let her wonder, love. I can explain every-thing when we go in. She was young herself

once upon a time, though one would hardly give her credit for it; and you may depend she has walked in this lane by moonlight. Yes, by the light of that very same sober old moon, who has looked down with the same indulgent smile upon endless generations of lovers."

"From Adam and Eve to Antony and Cleopatra," suggested Vixen, who couldn't get Egypt out of her head.

"Antony and Cleopatra were middle-aged lovers," said Rorie. "The moon must have despised them. Youth is the only season when love is wisdom, Vixen. In later life it means folly and drivelling, wrinkles badly hidden under paint, pencilled eyebrows, and false hair. Aphrodite should be for ever young."

"Perhaps that's why the poor thing puts on paint and false hair when she finds youth departed," said Vixen.

"Then she is no longer Aphrodite, but Venus Pandemos, and a wicked old harridan," answered Rorie.

And then he began to sing, with a rich full voice that rolled far upon the still air.

"Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And whilst ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry."

"What a fine voice you have, Rorie!" cried Vixen.

"Have I really? I thought it was only Lord Mallow who could sing. Do you know that I was desperately jealous of that nobleman, once—when I fancied he was singing himself into your affections. Little did I think that he was destined to become my greatest benefactor."

"I shall make you sing duets with me, sir, by-and-by."

"You shall make me stand on my head, or play clown in an amateur pantomime, or do anything

supremely ridiculous, if you like. 'Being your slave what can I do——'"

"Yes, you must sing Mendelssohn with me. 'I would that my love,' and 'Greeting.'"

"I have only one idea of greeting, after a cruel year of parting and sadness," said Rorie, drawing the bright young face to his own, and covering it with kisses.

Again Vixen urged that Miss Skipwith would be wondering; and this time with such insistence, that Rorie was obliged to turn back and ascend the hill.

"How cruel it is of you to snatch a soul out of Elysium," he remonstrated. "I felt as if I was lost in some happy dream—wandering down this path, which leads I know not where, into a dim wooded vale, such as the fairies love to inhabit?"

"The road leads down to the inn at Le Tac, where Cockney excursionists go to eat lobsters, and play skittles," said Vixen, laughing at her lover.

They went back to the manor house, where

they found Miss Skipwith annotating a tremendous manuscript on blue foolscap, a work whose outward semblance would have been enough to frighten and deter any publisher in his right mind.

"How late you are, Violet," she said, looking up dreamily from her manuscript; "I have been re-writing and polishing portions of my essay on Buddha. The time has flown, and I had no idea of the hour till Doddery came in just now to ask if he could shut up the house. And then I remembered that you had gone out to the gate to watch for Mr. Vawdrey."

"I'm afraid you must think our goings on rather eccentric," Rorie began shyly; "but, perhaps, Vix—— Miss Tempest has told you what old friends we are; that, in fact, I am quite the oldest friend she has. I came to Jersey on purpose to ask her to marry me, and she has been good enough"—smiling blissfully at Vixen, who tried to look daggers at him—"to say Yes."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Skipwith, looking much alarmed; "this is very embarrassing. I am so unversed in such matters. My life has been

given up to study, far from the haunts of man. My nephew informed me that there was a kind of —in point of fact—a flirtation between Miss Tempest and a gentleman in Hampshire, of which he highly disapproved, the gentleman being engaged to marry his cousin."

"It was I," cried Rorie, "but there was no flirtation between Miss Tempest and me. Whoever asserted such a thing was a slanderer, and—— I won't offend you by saying what he was, Miss Skipwith. There was no flirtation. I was Miss Tempest's oldest friend—her old playfellow, and we liked to see each other, and were always friendly together. But it was an understood thing that I was to marry my cousin. It was Miss Tempest's particular desire that I should keep an engagement made beside my mother's death-bed. If Miss Tempest had thought otherwise, I should have been at her feet. I would have flung that engagement to the winds; for Violet Tempest is the only woman I ever loved. And now all the world may know it, for my cousin has jilted me, and I am a free man."

"Good gracious! Can I really believe this?" asked Miss Skipwith, appealing to Violet.

"Rorie never told a falsehood in his life," Vixen answered proudly.

"I feel myself in a most critical position, my dear child," said Miss Skipwith, looking from Roderick's frank eager face to Vixen's downcast eyelids and mantling blushes. "I had hoped such a different fate for you. I thought the thirst for knowledge had arisen within you, that the aspiration to distinguish yourself from the ruck of ignorant women would follow the arising of that thirst, in natural sequence. And here I find you willing to marry a gentleman who happens to have been the companion of your childhood, and to resign —for his sake—all hopes of distinction."

"My chances of distinction were so small, dear Miss Skipwith," faltered Vixen. "If I had possessed your talents!"

"True," sighed the reformer of all the theologies. "We have not all the same gifts. There was a day when I thought it would be my lot to marry and subside into the dead level of domes-

ticity; but I am thankful to think I escaped the snare."

"And the gentleman who wanted to marry you, how thankful must he be!" thought Rorie dumbly.

"Yet there have been moments of depression when I have been weak enough to regret those early days," sighed Miss Skipwith. "At best our strength is tempered with weakness. It is the fate of genius to be lonely. And now I suppose I am to lose you, Violet?"

"I am summoned home to poor mamma," said Vixen.

"And after poor mamma has recovered, as I hope she speedily may, Violet will be wanted by her poor husband," said Rorie. "You must come across the sea and dance at our wedding, Miss Skipwith."

"Ah," sighed Miss Skipwith, "if you could but have waited for the establishment of my universal church, what a grand ceremonial your marriage might have been!"

Miss Skipwith, though regretful, and inclined

to take a dismal view of the marriage state and its responsibilities under the existing dispensation, was altogether friendly. She had a frugal supper of cold meat and salad, bread and cheese and cider, served in honour of Mr. Vawdrey, and they three sat till midnight talking happily—Miss Skipwith of theology, the other two of themselves and the smiling future, and such an innocent forest life as Rosalind and Orlando may have promised themselves, when they were deep in love, and the banished duke's daughter sighed for no wider kingdom than a shepherd's hut in the woodland, with the lover of her choice.

There were plenty of spare bedrooms at the manor house; but so bare and empty, so long abandoned of human occupants, as to be fit only for the habitation of mice and spiders, stray bat or wandering owl. So Roderick had to walk down the hill again to St. Helier's, where he found hospitality at an hotel. He was up betimes, too happy to need much sleep, and at seven o'clock he and Vixen were walking in the dewy garden, planning the wonderful life they were to lead at

Briarwood, and all the good they were to do. Happiness was to radiate from their home, as heat from the sun. The sick, and the halt, and the lame were to come to Briarwood; as they had come to the Abbey House before Captain Winstanley's barren rule of economy.

"God has been so good to us, Rorie," said Vixen, nestling at her lover's side. "Can we ever be good enough to others?"

"We'll do our best, anyhow, little one," he answered gently. "I am not like Mallow, I've no grand ideas about setting my native country in order and doing away with the poor laws; but I've always tried to make the people round me happy, and to keep them out of the workhouse and the county jail."

They went to the court-yard where poor Argus lived his life of isolation, and they told him they were going to be married, and that his pathway henceforward would be strewn with roses, or at all events Spratt's biscuits. He was particularly noisy and demonstrative, and appeared to receive this news with a wild rapture that was eminently

encouraging, doing his best to knock Roderick down, in the tumult of his delight. The lovers and the dog were alike childish in their infinite happiness, unthinking beings of the present hour, too happy to look backward or forward, this little space of time called "now" holding all things needful for delight.

These are the rare moments of life, to which the heart of man cries: "Oh stay, thou art so beautiful!" and could the death-bell toll then, and doom come then, life would end in a glorious euthanasia.

Violet's portmanteaux were packed. All was ready. There would be just time for a hurried breakfast with Miss Skipwith, and then the fly from St. Helier's would be at the gate to carry the exile on the first stage of the journey home.

"Poor mamma!" sighed Vixen. "How wicked of me to feel so happy, when she is ill."

And then Rorie comforted her with kindly-meant sophistries. Mrs. Winstanley's indisposition was doubtless more an affair of the nerves than

a real illness. She would be cheered and revived immediately by her daughter's return.

"How could she suppose she would be able to live without you!" cried Rorie. "I know I found life hard to bear."

"Yet you bore it for more than a year with admirable patience," retorted Vixen, laughing at him; "and I do not find you particularly altered or emaciated."

"Oh, I used to eat and drink," said Rorie, with a look of self-contempt. "I'm afraid I'm a horribly low-minded brute. I used even to enjoy my dinner, sometimes, after a long country ride; but I could never make you understand what a bore life was to me all last year, how the glory and enjoyment seemed to have gone out of existence. The dismal monotony of my days weighed upon me like a nightmare. Life had become a formula. I felt like a sick man who has to take so many doses of medicine, so many pills, so many basins of broth, in the twenty-four hours. There was no possible resistance. The sick-nurse was there, in the shape of Fate, ready to use brute

force if I rebelled. I never did rebel. I assure you, Vixen, I was a model lover. Mabel and I had not a single quarrel. I think that is a proof that we did not care a straw for each other."

"You and I will have plenty of quarrels," said Vixen. "It will be so nice to make friends again."

Now came the hurried breakfast—a cup of tea drunk standing, not a crumb eaten; agitated adieux to Miss Skipwith, who wept very womanly tears over her departing charge, and uttered good wishes in a choking voice. Even the Doddery's seemed to Vixen more human than usual, now that she was going to leave them, in all likelihood for ever. Miss Skipwith came to the gate to see the travellers off, and ascended the pilgrim's bench in order to have the latest view of the fly. From this eminence she waved her handkerchief as a farewell salutation.

"Poor soul!" sighed Vixen; "she has never been unkind to me; but oh! what a dreary life I have led in that dismal old house!"

They had Argus in the fly with them, sitting

up, with his mouth open, and his tail flapping against the bottom of the vehicle in perpetual motion. He kept giving his paw first to Vixen and then to Rorie, and exacted a great deal of attention, insomuch that Mr. Vawdrey exclaimed:

"Vixen, if you don't keep that dog within bounds, I shall think him as great a nuisance as a stepson. I offered to marry you, you know, not you and your dog."

"You are very rude!" cried Vixen.

"You don't expect me to be polite, I hope. What is the use of marrying one's old playfellow if one cannot be uncivil to her now and then? To me you will always be the tawny-haired little girl I used to tease."

"Who used to tease you, you mean. You were very meek in those days."

Oh, what a happy voyage that was, over the summer sea! They sat side by side upon the bridge, sheltered from wind and sun, and talked the happy nonsense lovers talk: but which can hardly be so sweet between lovers whose youth and childhood have been spent far apart, as between

these two who had been reared amidst the same sylvan world, and had every desire and every thought in unison. How brief the voyage seemed. It was but an hour or so since Roderick had been buying peaches and grapes, as they lay at the end of the pier at Guernsey, and here were the Needles and the chalky cliffs and undulating downs of the Wight. The Wight! That meant Hampshire and home!

"How often those downs have been our weather-glass, Rorie, when we have been riding across the hills between Lyndhurst and Beaulieu," said Vixen.

She had a world of questions to ask him about all that had happened during her exile. She almost expected to hear that Lyndhurst steeple had fallen; that the hounds had died of old age; that the Knightwood Oak had been struck by lightning; or that some among those calamities which time naturally brings had befallen the surroundings of her home. It was the strangest thing in the world to hear that nothing had happened, that everything was exactly the same as it had been when she went

away. That dreary year of exile had seemed long enough for earthquakes and destructions, or even for slow decay.

"Do you know what became of Arion?" asked Vixen, almost afraid to shape the question.

"Oh, I believe he was sold, soon after you left home," Rorie answered carelessly.

"Sold," echoed Vixen drearily. "Poor dear thing! Yes, I felt sure Captain Winstanley would sell him. But I hoped——"

"What?"

"That someone I knew might buy him. Lord Mallow perhaps."

"Lord Mallow! Ah, you thought he would buy your horse, for love of the rider. But you see constancy isn't one of that noble Irishman's virtues. He loves and he rides away—when the lady won't have him, *bien entendu*. No, Arion was sent up to Tattersall's, and disposed of in the usual way. Some fellow bought him for a covert hack."

"I hope the man wasn't a heavy weight," exclaimed Vixen, almost in tears.

She thought Rorie was horribly unfeeling.

"What does it matter? A horse must earn his salt."

"I had rather my poor pet had been shot, and buried in one of the meadows at home," said Vixen plaintively.

"Captain Winstanley was too wise to allow that. Your poor pet fetched a hundred and forty-five guineas under the hammer."

"I don't think it is very kind of you to talk of him so lightly," said Vixen.

This was the only little cloud that came between them in all the voyage. Long before sunset they were steaming into Southampton Water, and the yellow light was still shining on the furzy levels, when the brougham that contained Vixen and her fortunes drove along the road to Lyndhurst.

She had asked the coachman for news of his mistress, and had been told that Mrs. Winstanley was pretty much the same. The answer was in some measure reassuring: yet Violet's spirits began to sink as she drew nearer home, and must so soon find herself face to face with the truth. There was a sadness too in that quiet evening hour; and the

shadowy distances seemed full of gloom, after the dancing waves, and the gay morning light.

The dusk was creeping slowly on as the carriage passed the lodge, and drove between green walls of rhododendron to the house. Captain Winstanley was smoking his cigar in the porch, leaning against the Gothic masonry, in the attitude Vixen knew so well of old.

"If my mother were lying in her coffin I daresay he would be just the same," she thought bitterly.

The Captain came down to open the carriage-door. Vixen's first glance at his face showed her that he looked worn and anxious.

"Is mamma very ill?" she asked tremulously.

"Very ill," he answered, in a low voice. "Mind, you are to do or say nothing that can agitate her. You must be quiet and cheerful. If you see a change you must take care to say nothing about it."

"Why did you leave me so long in ignorance of her illness? Why did you not send for me sooner?"

"Your mother has only been seriously ill within

the last few days. I sent for you directly I saw any occasion for your presence," the Captain answered coldly.

He now for the first time became aware of Mr. Vawdrey, who had got out of the brougham on the other side and came round to assist in the unshipment of Violet's belongings.

"Good evening, Mr. Vawdrey. Where in Heaven's name did you spring from?" he inquired with a vexed air.

"I have had the honour of escorting Miss Tempest from Jersey, where I happened to be when she received your telegram."

"Wasn't that rather an odd proceeding, and likely to cause scandal?"

"I think not; for before people can hear that Miss Tempest and I crossed in the same boat I hope they will have heard that Miss Tempest and I are going to be married."

"I see," cried the Captain, with a short laugh of exceeding bitterness; "being off with the old love you have made haste to be on with the new."

"I beg your pardon. It is no new love, but a love as old as my boyhood," answered Rorie. "In one weak moment of my life I was foolish enough to let my mother choose a wife for me, though I had made my own choice, unconsciously, years before."

"May I go to mamma at once?" asked Vixen.

The Captain said Yes, and she went up the staircase and along the corridor to Mrs. Winstanley's room. Oh, how dear and familiar the old house looked, how full of richness and colour after the bareness and decay of Les Tourelles; brocaded curtains hanging in heavy folds against the carved oaken framework of a deep-set window; gleams of evening light stealing through old stained glass; everywhere a rich variety of form and hue that filled and satisfied the eye; a house worth living in assuredly, with but a little love to sanctify and hallow all these things. But how worthless these things if discord and hatred found a habitation among them.

The door of Mrs. Winstanley's room stood half

open, and the lamplight shone faintly from within. Violet went softly in. Her mother was lying on a sofa by the hearth, where a wood-fire had been newly lighted. Pauline was sitting opposite her, reading aloud in a very sleepy voice out of the *Court Journal*: "The bride was exquisitely attired in ivory satin, with flounces of old *Duchesse* lace, the skirt covered with *tulle, bouilloné,* and looped with garlands of orange-blossom——"

"Pauline," murmured the invalid feebly, "will you never learn to read with expression? You are giving me the vaguest idea of Lady Evelyn Fitzdamer's appearance."

Violet went over to the sofa and knelt by her mother's side and embraced her tenderly, looking at her earnestly all the while, in the clear soft lamplight. Yes, there was indeed a change. The always delicate face was pinched and shrunken. The ivory of the complexion had altered to a dull gray. Premature age had hollowed the cheeks, and lined the forehead. It was a change that meant decline and death. Violet's heart sank as she beheld it: but she remembered the Captain's

warning, and bravely strove to put on an appearance of cheerfulness.

"Dear mother, I am so happy to come home to you," she said gaily; "and I am going to nurse and pet you, for the next week or so; till you get tremendously well and strong, and are able to take me to innumerable parties."

"My dear Violet, I have quite given up parties; and I shall never be strong again."

"Dearest, it has always been your habit to fancy yourself an invalid."

"Yes, Violet, once I may have been full of fancies: but now I know that I am ill. You will not be unkind or unjust to Conrad, will you, dear? He sent for you directly I asked him. He has been all goodness to me. Try and get on with him nicely, dear, for my sake."

This was urged with such piteous supplication, that it would have needed a harder heart than Violet's to deny the prayer.

"Dear mother, forget that the Captain and I ever quarrelled," said Vixen. "I mean to be excellent friends with him henceforward. And,

darling, I have a secret to tell you if you would like to hear it."

"What secret, dear?"

"Lady Mabel Ashbourne has jilted Roderick!"

"My love, that is no secret. I heard all about it the day before yesterday. People have talked of nothing else since it happened. Lady Mabel has behaved shamefully."

"Lady Mabel has behaved admirably. If other women were wise enough to draw back at the last moment there would be fewer unhappy marriages. But Lady Mabel's elopement is only the prologue to my story."

"What can you mean, child?"

"Roderick came to Jersey to make me an offer."

"So soon! Oh, Violet, what bad taste!"

"Ought he to have gone into mourning? He did not even sing willow, but came straight off to me, and told me he had loved me all his life; so now you will have my *trousseau* to think about, dearest, and I shall want all your good taste. You know how little I have of my own."

"Ah, Violet, if you had only married Lord Mallow! I could have given my whole mind to your *trousseau* then: but it is too late now, dear. I have not strength enough to interest myself in anything."

The truth of this complaint was painfully obvious. Pamela's day was done. She lay, half effaced among her down pillows, as weak and helpless-looking as a snowdrop whose stem is broken. The life that was left in her was the merest remnant of life. It was as if one could see the last sands running down in the glass of time.

Violet sat by her side, and pressed her cold hands in both her own. Mrs. Winstanley was very cold, although the log had blazed up fiercely, and the room seemed stifling to the traveller who had come out of the cool night air.

"Dear mother, there will be no pleasure for me in being married if you do not take any interest in my *trousseau*," pleaded Vixen, trying to cheer the invalid by dwelling on the things her soul had most loved in health.

"Do not talk about it, my dear," her mother exclaimed peevishly. "I don't know where the money is to come from. Theodore's bill was positively dreadful. Poor Conrad had quite a struggle to pay it. You will be rich when you are of age, but we are awfully poor. If we do not save money during the next few years we shall be destitute. Conrad says so. Fifteen hundred a year, and a big house like this to maintain. It would be starvation. Conrad has closed Theodore's account. I am sure I don't know where your *trousseau* is to come from."

Here the afflicted Pamela began to sob hysterically, and Vixen found it hard work to comfort her.

"My dearest mother, how can you be poor and I rich?" she said, when the invalid had been tranquillised, and was lying helpless and exhausted. "Do you suppose I would not share my income with you? Rorie has plenty of money. He would not want any of mine. You can have it all, if you like."

"You talk like a child, Violet. You know

nothing of the world. Do you think I would take your money, and let people say I robbed my own daughter? I have a little too much self-respect for that. Conrad is doing all he can to make our future comfortable. I have been foolish and extravagant. But I shall never be so any more. I do not care about dress or society now. I have outlived those follies."

"Dear mother, I cannot bear to hear you talk like that," said Vixen, feeling that when her mother left off caring about fine dresses she must be getting ready for that last garment which we must all wear some day, the fashion whereof changes but little. "Why should you relinquish society, or leave off dressing stylishly? You are in the prime of life."

"No, Violet, I am a poor faded creature," whimpered Mrs. Winstanley, "stout women are handsome at forty, or even"—with a shudder—"five-and-forty. The age suits their style. But I was always slim and fragile, and of late I have grown painfully thin. No one but a Parisian dressmaker could make me presentable; and I

have done with Paris dresses. The utmost I can hope for is to sit alone by the fireside, and work antimacassars in crewels."

"But, dear mother, you did not marry Captain Winstanley in order to lead such a life as that? You might as well be in a *béguinage*."

Vain were Vixen's efforts to console and cheer. A blight had fallen upon her mother's mind and spirits—a blight that had crept slowly on, unheeded by the husband, till one morning the local practitioner—a gentleman who had lived all his life among his patients, and knew them so well externally that he might fairly be supposed to have a minute acquaintance with their internal organism—informed Captain Winstanley that he feared there was something wrong with his wife's heart, and that he thought it would be well to get the highest opinion.

The Captain, startled out of his habitual self-command, looked up from his desk with an ashy countenance.

"Do you mean that Mrs. Winstanley has heart disease—something organically wrong?"

"Unhappily I fear it is so. I have been for some time aware that she had a weak heart. Her complexion, her feeble circulation, several indications have pointed to that conclusion. This morning I have made a thorough examination, and I find mischief, decided mischief."

"That means she may die at any moment, suddenly, without an instant's warning."

"There would always be that fear. Or she might sink gradually from want of vital power. There is a sad deficiency of power. I hardly ever knew anyone remain so long in so low a state."

"You have been attending her, off and on, ever since our marriage. You must have seen her sinking. Why have you not warned me before?"

"It seemed hardly necessary. You must have perceived the change yourself. You must have noticed her want of appetite, her distaste for exertion of any kind, her increasing feebleness."

"I am not a doctor."

"No; but these are things that speak plainly

to every eye — to the eye of affection most of all."

"We are slow to perceive the alteration in anyone we see daily and hourly. You should have drawn my attention to my wife's health. It is unfair, it is horrible to let this blow come upon me unawares."

If the Captain had appeared indifferent hitherto, there was no doubt of the intensity of his feeling now. He had started up from his chair, and walked backwards and forwards, strongly agitated.

"Shall we have another opinion?" asked Dr. Martin.

"Certainly. The highest in the land."

"Dr. Lorrimer, of Harley Street, is the most famous man for heart disease."

"I'll telegraph to him immediately," said the Captain.

He ordered his horse, rode into Lyndhurst, and despatched his telegram without the loss of a minute. Never had Dr. Martin seen anyone more in earnest, or more deeply stricken by an announcement of evil.

"Poor fellow, he must be very fond of her," mused the surgeon, as he rode off to his next call. "And yet I should have thought she must be rather a tiresome kind of woman to live with. Her income dies with her I suppose. That makes a difference."

The specialist from Harley Street arrived at the Abbey House on the following afternoon. He made his examination and gave his opinion, which was very much the same as Dr. Martin's, but clothed in more scientific language.

"This poor lady's heart has been wearing out for the last twenty years," he told the local surgeon; "but she seems, from your account, to have been using it rather worse for the last year or so. Do you know if she has had any particular occasion for worry?"

"Her only daughter has not got on very well with the second husband, I believe," said Dr. Martin. "That may have worried her."

"Naturally. Small domestic anxieties of that kind are among the most potent causes of heart disease." And then Dr. Lorrimer gave his in-

structions about treatment. He had not the faintest hope of saving the patient, but he gave her the full benefit of his science. A man could scarcely come so far and do less. When he went out into the hall and met the Captain, who was waiting anxiously for his verdict, he began in the usual oracular strain; but Captain Winstanley cut him short without ceremony.

"I don't want to hear details," he said. "Martin will do everything you tell him. I want the best or the worst you can tell me in straightest language. Can you save my wife, or am I to lose her?"

"My dear sir, while there is life there is hope," answered the physician, with the compassionate air that had grown habitual, like his black frock-coat and general sobriety of attire. "I have seen wonderful recoveries—or rather a wonderful prolongation of life, for cure is, of course, impossible—in cases as bad as this. But——"

"Ah!" cried the Captain bitterly, "there is a 'but.'"

"In this case there is a sad want of

rallying power. Frankly, I have very little hope. Do all you can to cheer and comfort your wife's mind, and to make her last days happy. All medicine apart, that is about the best advice I can give you."

After this the doctor took his fee, gave the Captain's hand a cordial grip, expressive of sympathy and kindliness, and went his way, feeling assured that a good deal hung upon that little life which he had left slowly ebbing away, like a narrow rivulet dwindling into dryness under a July sun.

"What does the London doctor say of me, Conrad?" asked Mrs. Winstanley, when her husband went to her presently, with his countenance composed and cheerful. "He tired me dreadfully with his stethoscope. Does he think me very ill? Is there anything wrong with my lungs?"

"No, love. It is a case of weakness and languor. You must make up your mind to get strong; and you will do more for yourself than all the physicians in London can do."

"But what does he say of my heart? How does he explain that dreadful fluttering — the suffocating sensation—the——?"

"He explains nothing. It is a nervous affection, which you must combat by getting strong. Dear love!" exclaimed the Captain, with a very real burst of feeling, "what can I do to make your life happy? what can I do to assure you of my love?"

"Send for Violet," faltered his wife, raising herself upon her elbow, and looking at him with timorous eagerness. "I have never been happy since she left us. It seems as if I had turned her out of doors—out of her own house — my kind husband's only daughter. It has preyed upon my mind continually, that — and other things."

"Dearest, I will telegraph to her in an hour. She shall be with you as soon as the steamer can bring her."

"A thousand thanks, Conrad. You are always good. I know I have been weak and foolish to think——"

Here she hesitated, and tears began to roll down her hollow cheeks.

"To think what, love?" asked her husband, tenderly.

If love, if tenderness, if flattery, if all sweetest things that ever man said to woman could lure this feeble spirit back to life, she should be so won, vowed the Captain. He had never been unkind to her, or thought unkindly of her. If he had never loved her, he had, at least, been tolerant. But now, clinging to her as the representative of fortune, happiness, social status, he felt that she was assuredly his best and dearest upon earth.

"To think that you never really cared for me!" she whimpered; "that you married me for the sake of this house, and my income!"

"Pamela, do you remember what Tom Jones said to his mistress when she pretended to doubt his love?"

"My dear Conrad, I never read 'Tom Jones.' I have heard dear Edward talk of it as if it was something too dreadful."

"Ah, I forgot. Of course, it is not a lady's

book. Tom told his Sophia to look in the glass, if she were inclined to question his love for her, and one look at her own sweet face would convince her of his truth. Let it be so with yourself, dear. Ask yourself why I should not love the sweetest and most lovable of women."

If sugarplums of speech, if loverlike attentions, could have cured Pamela Winstanley's mortal sickness, she might yet have recovered. But the hour had gone by when such medicaments might have prevailed. While the Captain had shot, and hunted, and caught mighty salmon, and invested his odd hundreds, and taken his own pleasure in various ways, with almost all the freedom of bachelor life, his wife had, unawares, been slowly dying. The light had burned low in the socket; and who shall reillumine that brief candle when its day is over? It needed now but a breath to quench the feeble flame.

"Great Heaven!" cried Captain Winstanley, pacing up and down his study, distraught with the pangs of wounded self-interest; "I have been taking care of her money, when I ought to have

taken care of her. It is her life that all hangs upon: and I have let that slip through my fingers while I have planned and contrived to save a few beggarly hundreds. Short-sighted idiot that I have been! Poor Pamela! And she has been so yielding, so compliant to my every wish! A month—a week, perhaps—and she will be gone: and that handsome spitfire will have the right to thrust me from this house. No, my lady, I will not afford you that triumph. My wife's coffin and I will go out together."

CHAPTER X.

"ALL THE RIVERS RUN INTO THE SEA."

For some days Violet's return seemed to have a happy effect upon the invalid. Never had daughter been more devoted, more loving, fuller of sweet cares and consolations for a dying mother, than this daughter. Seeing the mother and child together in this supreme hour, no onlooker could have divined that these two had been ever less fondly united than mother and child should be. The feeble and fading woman seemed to lean on the strong bright girl, to gain a reflected strength from her fulness of life and vigour. It was as if Vixen, with her shining hair and fair young face, brought healthful breezes into the sickly perfumed atmosphere of the invalid's rooms.

Roderick Vawdrey had a hard time of it during these days of sadness and suspense. He could not deny the right of his betrothed to devote all her

time and thought to a dying mother; and yet, having but newly won her for his very own, after dreary years of constraint and severance, he longed for her society as lover never longed before; or at least he thought so. He hung about the Abbey House all day, heedless of the gloomy looks he got from Captain Winstanley, and of the heavy air of sadness that pervaded the house, and was infinitely content and happy when he was admitted to Mrs. Winstanley's boudoir to take an afternoon cup of tea, and talk for half an hour or so, in subdued tones, with mother and daughter.

"I am very glad that things have happened as they have, Roderick," Mrs. Winstanley said languidly; "though I'm afraid it would make your poor mamma very unhappy if she could know about it. She had so set her heart on your marrying Lady Mabel."

"Forgetting that it was really my heart which was concerned in the business," said Rorie. "Dear Mabel was wise enough to show us all the easiest way out of our difficulties. I sent her my mother's emerald cross and earrings, the day before yester-

day, with as pretty a letter as I could write. I think it was almost poetical."

"And those emeralds of Lady Jane Vawdrey's are very fine," remarked Mrs. Winstanley. "I don't think there is a feather in one of the stones."

"It was almost like giving away your property, wasn't it, Vixen?" said Rorie, looking admiringly at his beloved. "But I have a lot of my mother's jewels for you, and I wanted to send Mabel something, to show her that I was not ungrateful."

"You acted very properly, Rorie; and as to jewellery, you know very well I don't care a straw for it."

"It is a comfort to me to know you will have Lady Jane's pearl necklace," murmured Mrs. Winstanley. "It will go so well with my diamond locket. Ah, Rorie, I wish I had been strong enough to see to Violet's *trousseau*. It is dreadful to think that it may have to be made by a provincial dressmaker, and with no one to supervise and direct."

"Dearest mother, you are going to supervise

everything," exclaimed Vixen. "I shall not think of being married till you are well and strong again."

"That will be never," sighed the invalid.

Upon this point she was very firm. They all tried—husband, daughter, and friends—to delude her with false hopes, thinking thus to fan the flame of life and keep the brief candle burning a little longer. She was not deceived. She felt herself gradually, painlessly sinking. She complained but little; much less than in the days when her ailments had been in some part fanciful; but she knew very surely that her day was done.

"It is very sweet to have you with me, Violet," she said. "Your goodness, and Conrad's loving attentions, make me very happy. I feel almost as if I should like to live a few years longer."

"Only almost, mother darling?" exclaimed Violet reproachfully.

"I don't know, dear. I have such a weary feeling; as if life at the very best were not worth

the trouble it costs us. I shouldn't mind going on living if I could always lie here, and take no trouble about anything, and be nursed and waited upon, and have you or Conrad always by my side—but to get well again, and to have to get up, and go about among other people, and take up all the cares of life—no dear, I am much too weary for that. And then if I could get well to-morrow, old age and death would still be staring me in the face. I could not escape them. No, love, it is much better to die now, before I am very old, or quite hideous; even before my hair is gray."

She took up one of the soft auburn tresses from her pillow, and looked at it, half sadly.

"Your dear papa used to admire my hair, Violet," she said. "There are a few gray hairs, but you would hardly notice them; but my hair is much thinner than it used to be, and I don't think I could ever have made up my mind to wear false hair. It never quite matches one's own. I have seen Lady Ellangowan wearing three distinct heads of hair; and yet gentlemen admire her."

Mrs. Winstanley was always at her best during those afternoon tea-drinkings. The strong tea revived her; Roderick's friendly face and voice cheered her. They took her back to the remote past, to the kind Squire's day of glory, which she remembered as the happiest time of her life; even now, when her second husband was doing all things possible to prove his sincerity and devotion. She had never been completely happy in this second marriage. There had always been a flavour of remorse mingled with her cup of joy; the vague consciousness that she had done a foolish thing, and that the world—her little world within a radius of twenty miles—was secretly laughing at her.

"Do you remember the day we came home from our honeymoon, Conrad," she said to her husband, as he sat by her in the dusk one evening, sad and silent, "when there was no carriage to meet us, and we had to come home in a fly? It was an omen, was it not?"

"An omen of what, dearest?"

"That all things were not to go well with

us in our married life; that we were not to be quite happy."

"Have you not been happy, Pamela? I have tried honestly to do my duty to you."

"I know you have, Conrad. You have been all goodness; I always have said so to Violet—and to everyone. But I have had my cares. I felt that I was too old for you. That has preyed upon my mind."

"Was that reasonable, Pamela, when I have never felt it?"

"Perhaps not at first; and even if you had felt the disparity in our ages you would have been too generous to let me perceive the change in your feelings. But I should have grown an old woman while you were still a young man. It would have been too dreadful. Indeed, dear, it is better as it is. Providence is very good to me."

"Providence is not very good to me, in taking you from me," said the Captain, with a touch of bitterness.

It seemed to him passing selfish in his wife

to be so resigned to leaving life, and so oblivious of the fact that her income died with her, and that he was to be left out in the cold. One evening, however, when they were sitting alone together, this fact presented itself suddenly to her mind.

"You will lose the Abbey House when I am gone, Conrad."

"My love, do you think I could live in this house without you?"

"And my income, Conrad; that dies with me, does it not?"

"Yes, love."

"That is hard for you."

"I can bear that, Pamela, if I am to bear the loss of you."

"Dearest love, you have always been disinterested. How could I ever doubt you? Perhaps —indeed I am sure—if I were to ask Violet, she would give you the fifteen hundred a year that I was to have had after she came of age."

"Pamela, I could not accept any favour from

your daughter. You would deeply offend me if you were to suggest such a thing."

This was true. Much as he valued money, he would have rather starved than taken sixpence from the girl who had scorned him; the girl whose very presence gave rise to a terrible conflict in his breast — passionate love, bitterest antagonism.

"There are the few things that I possess myself—jewels, books, furniture—special gifts of dear Edward's. Those are my own, to dispose of as I like. I might make a will leaving them to you, Conrad. They are trifles, but——"

"They will be precious *souvenirs* of our wedded life," murmured the Captain, who was very much of Mr. Wemmick's opinion, that portable property of any kind was worth having.

A will was drawn up and executed next day, in which Mrs. Winstanley left her diamonds to her daughter, her wardrobe to the faithful and long-suffering Pauline—otherwise Mary Smith—and all the rest of her belongings to her dearly-beloved husband, Conrad Winstanley. The Captain was

a sufficient man of business to take care that this will was properly executed.

In all this time his daily intercourse with Violet was a source of exceeding bitterness. She was civil, and even friendly in her manner to him—for her mother's sake. And then, in the completeness of her union with Rorie, she could afford to be generous and forgiving. The old spirit of antagonism died out: her foe was so utterly fallen. A few weeks and the old home would be her own —the old servants could come back, the old pensioners might gather again around the kitchen-door. All could be once more as it had been in her father's lifetime; and no trace of Conrad Winstanley's existence would be left; for, alas! it was now an acknowledged fact that Violet's mother was dying. The most sanguine among her friends had ceased to hope. She herself was utterly resigned. She spent some part of each day in gentlo religious exercises with kindly Mr. Scobel. Her last hours were as calm and reasonable as those of Socrates.

So Captain Winstanley had to sit quietly by,

and see Violet and her lover grouped by his fading wife's sofa, and school himself, as he best might, to endure the spectacle of their perfect happiness in each other's love, and to know that he—who had planned his future days so wisely, and provided, like the industrious ant, for the winter of his life—had broken down in his scheme of existence, after all, and had no more part in this house which he had deemed his own than a traveller at an inn.

It was hard, and he sat beside his dying wife, with anger and envy gnawing his heart—anger against fate, envy of Roderick Vawdrey, who had won the prize. If evil wishes could have killed, neither Violet nor her lover would have outlived that summer. Happily the Captain was too cautious a man to be guilty of any overt act of rage or hatred. His rancorous feelings were decently hidden under a gentlemanly iciness of manner, to which no one could take objection.

The fatal hour came unawares, one calm September afternoon, about six weeks after Violet's return from Jersey. Captain Winstanley had been reading one of Tennyson's idyls to his wife, till she

sank into a gentle slumber. He left her, with Pauline seated at work by one of the windows, and went to his study tc write some letters. Five o'clock was the established hour for kettledrum, but of late the invalid had been unable to bear even the mild excitement of two or three visitors at this time. Violet now attended alone to her mother's afternoon tea, kneeling by her side as she sipped the refreshing infusion, and coaxing her to eat a waferlike slice of bread-and-butter, or a few morsels of sponge-cake.

This afternoon, when Violet went softly into the room, carrying the little Japanese tray and tiny teapot, she found her mother lying just as the Captain had left her an hour before.

"She's been sleeping so sweetly, miss," whispered Pauline. "I never knew her sleep so quiet since she's been ill."

That stillness which seemed so good a thing to the handmaid frightened the daughter. Violet set her tray down hastily on the nearest table, and ran to her mother's sofa. She looked at the pale and sunken cheek, just visible in the downy

hollow of the pillows; she touched the hand lying on the silken coverlet. That marble coldness, that waxen hue of the cheek, told her the awful truth. She fell on her knees beside the sofa, with a cry of sharp and sudden sorrow.

"Oh mother, mother! I ought to have loved you better all my life!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE BLUEBEARD CHAMBER.

The day before the funeral Captain Winstanley received a letter from his stepdaughter, offering to execute any deed he might choose to have prepared, settling upon him the income which his wife was to have had after Violet's majority.

"I know that you are a heavy loser by my mother's death," she wrote, "and I shall be glad to do anything in my power to lessen that loss. I know well that it was her earnest wish that your future should be provided for. I told her a few days before she died that I should make you this offer. I do it with all my heart; and I shall consider myself obliged by your acceptance of it."

The Captain's reply was brief and firm.

"I thank you for your generous offer," he said, "which I feel assured is made in good faith; but I think you ought to know that there are reasons why it is impossible I should accept any benefit from your hand. I shall not re-enter the Abbey House after my wife's funeral. You will be sole and sovereign mistress of all things from that hour."

He kept his word. He was chief mourner at the quiet but stately burial under the old yew-tree in Beechdale churchyard. When all was over he got into a fly, and drove to the station at Lyndhurst Road, whence he departed by the first train for London. He told no one anything about his plans for the future; he left no address but his club. He was next heard of six months later, in South America.

Violet had telegraphed for her old governess directly after Mrs. Winstanley's death; and that good and homely person arrived on the day after the funeral, to take up her abode with her old pupil, as companion and chaperon, until Miss Tempest should have become Mrs. Vawdrey, and

would have but one companion henceforward in all the journey of life. Rorie and Vixen were to be married in six months. Mrs. Winstanley had made them promise that her death should delay their marriage as little as possible.

"You can have a very quiet wedding, you know, dear," she said. "You can be married in your travelling-dress—something pretty in gray silk and terry velvet, or with chinchilla trimming, if it should be winter. Chinchilla is so distinguished-looking. You will go abroad, I suppose, for your honeymoon. Pau, or Monaco, or any of those places on the Mediterranean."

It had pleased her to settle everything for the lovers. Violet remembered all these speeches with a tender sorrow. There was comfort in the thought that her mother had loved her, according to her lights.

It had been finally settled between the lovers that they were to live at the Abbey House. Briarwood was to be let to any wealthy individual who might desire a handsome house, surrounded by exquisitely arranged gardens, and burdened with glass that

would cost a small fortune annually to maintain. Before Mr. Vawdrey could put his property into the hands of the auctioneers, he received a private offer which was in every respect satisfactory.

Lady Mallow wished to spend some part of every year near her father and mother, who lived a good deal at Ashbourne, the Duke becoming yearly more devoted to his Chillingham oxen and monster turnips. Lord Mallow, who loved his native isle to distraction, but always found six weeks in a year a sufficient period of residence there, was delighted to please his bride, and agreed to take Briarwood, furnished, on a seven-years' lease. The orchid-houses were an irresistible attraction; and by this friendly arrangement Lady Mallow would profit by the alterations and improvements her cousin had made for her gratification, when he believed she was to be his wife.

Briarwood thus disposed of, Rorie was free to consider the Abbey House his future home; and Violet had the happiness of knowing that the good old house in which her childhood had been spent would be her habitation always, till she too was

carried to the family vault under the old yew-tree. There are people who languish for change, for whom the newest is ever the best; but it was not thus with Violet Tempest. The people she had known all her life, the scenes amidst which she had played when a child, were to her the dearest people and the loveliest scenes upon earth. It would be pleasant to her to travel with her husband, and see fair lands across the sea: but pleasanter still would be the home-coming to the familiar hearth beside which her father had sat, the old faces that had looked upon him, the hands that had served him, the gardens he had planted and improved.

"I should like to show you Briarwood before it is let, Vixen," Mr. Vawdrey said to his sweetheart, one November morning. "You may at least pay my poor patrimony the compliment of looking at it before it becomes the property of Lord and Lady Mallow. Suppose you and Miss McCroke drive over and drink tea with me this afternoon? I believe my housekeeper brews pretty good tea."

"Very well, Rorie, we'll come to tea. I should rather like to see the improvements you made for

Lady Mabel, before your misfortune. I think Lord Mallow must consider it very good of you to let him have the benefit of all the money you spent, instead of bringing an action for breach of promise against his wife, as you might very well have done."

"I daresay. But you see I am of a forgiving temper. Well, I shall tell my housekeeper to have tea, and buns, and jam, and all the things children —and young ladies—like, at four o'clock. We had better make it four instead of five, as the afternoons are so short."

"If you are impertinent we won't come."

"Oh yes you will. Curiosity will bring you. Remember this will be your last chance of seeing the Bluebeard chamber at Briarwood."

"Is there a Bluebeard chamber?"

"Of course. Did you ever know of a family mansion without one?"

Vixen was delighted at the idea of exploring her lover's domain, now that he and it were her own property. How well she remembered going with her father to the meet on Briarwood lawn.

Yet it seemed a century ago—the very beginning of her life—before she had known sorrow.

Miss McCroke, who was ready to do anything her pupil desired, was really pleased at the idea of seeing the interior of Briarwood.

"I have never been inside the doors, you know, dear," she said, "often as I have driven past the gates with your dear mamma. Lady Jane Vawdrey was not the kind of person to invite a governess to go and see her. She was a strict observer of the laws of caste. The Duchess has much less pride."

"I don't think Lady Jane ever quite forgave herself for marrying a commoner," said Vixen. "She revenged her own weakness upon other people."

Violet had a new pair of ponies, which her lover had chosen for her, after vain endeavours to trace and recover the long-lost Titmouse. These she drove to Briarwood, Miss McCroke resigning herself to the will of Providence with a blind submission worthy of a Moslem; feeling that if it were written that she was to be flung head foremost

out of a pony-carriage, the thing would happen sooner or later. Staying at home to-day would not ward off to-morrow's doom. So she took her place in the cushioned valley by Violet's side, and sat calm and still, while the ponies, warranted quiet to drive in single or double harness, stood up on end and made as if they had a fixed intention of scaling the rhododendron bank.

"They'll settle down directly I've taken the freshness out of them," said Vixen blandly, as she administered a reproachful touch of the whip.

"I hope they will," replied Miss McCroke; "but don't you think Bates ought to have seen the freshness taken out of them before we started?"

They were soon tearing along the smooth Roman road at a splendid pace, "the ponies going like clockwork," as Vixen remarked approvingly; but poor Miss McCroke thought that any clock which went as fast as those ponies would be deemed the maddest of timekeepers.

They found Roderick standing at his gates, waiting for them. There was a glorious fire in

the amber and white drawing-room, a dainty tea table drawn in front of the hearth, the easiest of chairs arranged on each side of the table, an urn hissing, Rorie's favourite pointer stretched upon the hearth, everything cosy and homelike. Briarwood was not such a bad place after all, Vixen thought. She could have contrived to be happy with Roderick even here; but of course the Abbey House was, in her mind, a hundred times better, being just the one perfect home in the world.

They all three sat round the fire, drinking tea, poured out by Vixen, who played the mistress of the house sweetly. They talked of old times, sometimes sadly, sometimes sportively, glancing swiftly from one old memory to another. All Rorie's tiresome ways, all Vixen's mischievous tricks, were remembered.

"I think I led you a life in those days, didn't I, Rorie?" asked Vixen, leaving the teatray, and stealing softly behind her lover's chair to lean over his shoulder caressingly, and pull his thick brown beard. "There is nothing so delightful as to

torment the person one's loves best in the world. Oh, Rorie, I mean to lead you a life by-and-by!"

"Dearest, the life you lead me must needs be sweet, for it will be spent with you."

After tea they set out upon a round of inspection, and admired the new morning-room that had been devised for Lady Mabel, in the very latest style of Dutch Renaissance—walls the colour of muddy water, glorified ginger-jars, ebonised chairs and tables, and willow-pattern plates all round the cornice; curtains mud-colour, with a mediæval design in dirty yellow, or, in upholsterer's language, "old gold."

"I should like to show you the stables before it is quite dark," said Rorie presently. "I made a few slight improvements there while the builders were about."

"You know I have a weakness for stables," answered Vixen. "How many a lecture I used to get from poor mamma about my unfortunate tastes. But can there be anything in the world nicer than a good old-fashioned stable, smelling of clover and newly-cut hay?"

"Stables are very nice indeed, and very useful, in their proper place," remarked Miss McCroke sententiously.

"But one ought not to bring the stables into the drawing-room," said Vixen gravely. "Come, Rorie, let us see your latest improvements in stable-gear."

They all went out to the stone-paved quadrangle, which was as neatly kept as a West-End livery-yard. Miss McCroke had an ever-present dread of the ubiquitous hind-legs of strange horses: but she followed her charge into the stable, with the same heroic fidelity with which she would have followed her to the scaffold or the stake.

There were all Rorie's old favourites—Starlight Bess, with her shining brown coat, and one white stocking; Blue Peter, broad-chested, well-ribbed, strong of limb; Pixie, the gray Arab mare, which Lady Jane used to drive in a park-phaeton—quite an ancient lady; Donald, the iron-sinewed hunter.

Vixen knew them all, and went up to them and patted their graceful heads, and made herself at home with them.

"You are all coming to the Abbey House to live, you dear things," she said delightedly.

There was a loose-box, shut off by a five-foot wainscot partition, surmounted by a waved iron rail, at one end of the stable, and on approaching this enclosure Vixen was saluted with sundry grunts and snorting noises, which seemed curiously familiar.

At the sound of these she stopped short, turned red, and then pale, and looked intently at Rorie, who was standing close by, smiling at her.

"That is my Bluebeard chamber," he said gaily. "There's something too awful inside."

"What horse have you got there?" cried Vixen eagerly.

"A horse that I think will carry you nicely, when we hunt together."

"What horse? Have I ever seen him? Do I know him?"

The grunts and snortings were continued with a crescendo movement; an eager nose was rattling the latch of the door that shut off the loose-box.

"If you have a good memory for old friends, I think you will know this one," said Rorie, withdrawing a bolt.

A head pushed open the door, and in another moment Vixen's arms were round her old favourite's sleek neck, and the velvet nostrils were sniffing her hair and cheek, in most loving recognition.

"You dear, dear old fellow!" cried Vixen; and then turning to Rorie: "You told me he was sold at Tattersall's!" she exclaimed.

"So he was, and I bought him."

"Why did not you tell me that?"

"Because you did not ask me."

"I thought you so unkind, so indifferent about him."

"You were unkind when you could think it possible I should let your favourite horse fall into strange hands. But perhaps you would rather Lord Mallow had bought him?"

"To think that you should have kept the secret all this time!" said Vixen.

"You see I am not a woman, and can keep

a secret. I wanted to have one little surprise for you, as a reward when you had been especially good."

"You are good," she said, standing on tip-toe to kiss him. "And though I have loved you all my life, I don't think I have loved you the least little bit too much."

EPILOGUE.

Vixen and Rorie were married in the spring, when the forest glades were yellow with primroses, the mossy banks blue with violets, and the cuckoo was heard with monotonous iteration from sunrise to sundown. They were married in the little village church at Beechdale, and Mrs. Scobel declared that Miss Tempest's wedding was the prettiest that ever had been solemnised in that small Gothic temple. Never, perhaps, even at Eastertide, had been seen such a wealth of spring blossoms, the wildlings of the woods and hills. The Duchess had offered the contents of her hot-houses, Lady Ellangowan had offered waggon-loads of azaleas and camellias, but Vixen had refused them all. She would allow no decorations but the wild flowers which the school-children could gather. Primroses, violets, bluebells, the

firstlings of the fern tribe, cowslips, and all the tribe of innocent forest blossoms, with their quaint rustic names, most of them as old as Shakespeare.

It was a very quiet wedding. Vixen would have no one present except the Scobels, Miss McCroke, her two bridesmaids, and Sir Henry Tolmash, an old friend of her father, who was to give her away. He was a white-haired old man, who had given his latter days up to farming, and had not a thought above turnips and top-dressing; but Violet honoured him, because he had been her father's oldest friend. For bridesmaids she had Colonel Carteret's daughters, a brace of harmless young ladies, whose conversation was as stereotyped as a French and English vocabulary, but who dressed well and looked pretty.

There was no display of wedding gifts, no ceremonious wedding breakfast. Vixen remembered the wedding feast at her mother's second marriage, and what a dreary ceremonial it had been.

The bride wore her gray silk travelling-dress, with gray hat and feather, and she and her husband went straight from the church to the railway station, on their way to untrodden paths in the Engadine, whence they were to return at no appointed time.

"We are coming back when we are tired of mountain scenery and of each other," Violet told Mrs. Scobel in the church porch.

"That will be never!" exclaimed Rorie, looking ineffably happy, but not very much like a bridegroom, in his comfortable gray suit. "You might just as well say that we are going to live among the mountains as long as Rip Van Winkle. No, Mrs. Scobel, we are not going to remain away from you fifty years. We are coming back in time for the hunting."

Then came kissing and handshaking, a shower of violets and primroses upon the narrow churchyard path, a hearty huzza from the assembled village, all clustered about the oaken gate-posts. The envious carriage-door shut in bride and bridegroom, the coachman touched his horses, and they

were gone up the hill, out of the peaceful valley, to Lyndhurst and the railway.

"How dreadfully I shall miss them," said Mrs. Scobel, who had spent much of her leisure with the lovers. "They are both so full of life and brightness!"

"They are young and happy!" said her husband quietly. "Who would not miss youth and happiness?"

When the first frosts had seared the beeches to a fiery red, and the berries were bright on the hawthorns, and the latest bloom of the heather had faded on hill and plain, and the happy pigs had devoured all the beech-nuts, Mr. Vawdrey and his wife came back from their exploration of Alpine snows and peaceful Swiss villages, to the good old Abbey House. Their six-months' honeymoon had been all gladness. They were the veriest boy and girl husband and wife who had ever trodden those beaten tracks. They teased each other, and quarrelled, and made friends again like children, and were altogether happy. And now they came back

to the Forest, bronzed by many a long day's sunshine, and glowing with health and high spirits. The glass of Time seemed to be turned backward at the Abbey House; for all the old servants came back, and white-haired old Bates ruled in the well-filled stables, and all things were as in the dead and gone Squire's time.

Among Roderick's wedding gifts was one from Lord Mallow: Bullfinch, the best horse in that nobleman's stable.

"I know your wife would like you to have her father's favourite hunter," wrote Lord Mallow. "Tell her that he has never been sick or sorry since he has been in my stable, and that I have always taken particular care of him, for her sake."

Among Violet's presents was a diamond bracelet from Lady Mallow, accompanied by a very cordial letter; and almost the first visit that the Vawdreys received after they came home was from Lord and Lady Mallow. The first great dinner to which

they were bidden was at Briarwood, where it seemed a curious thing for Rorie to go as a guest.

Matrimony with the man of her choice had wondrously improved Mabel Ashbourne. She was less self-sufficient and more conciliating. Her ambition, hitherto confined to the desire to excel all other women in her own person, had assumed a less selfish form. She was now only ambitious for her husband; greedy of parliamentary fame for him; full of large hopes about the future of Ireland. She looked forward complacently to the day when she and Lord Mallow would be reigning at Dublin Castle, and when Hibernian arts and industries would revive and flourish under her fostering care. Pending that happy state of things she wore Irish poplin, and Irish lace, Irish stockings, and Irish linen. She attended Her Majesty's Drawing-room on St. Patrick's Day, with a sprig of real shamrock—sent her by one of her husband's tenantry—among the diamonds that sparkled on her bosom. She was more intensely Irish than the children of the soil;

just as converts to Romanism are ever more severely Roman than those born and nurtured in the faith.

Her husband was intensely proud of his wife, and of his alliance with the house of Ashbourne. The Duke, at first inclined to resent the scandal of an elopement and the slight offered to his favourite, Rorie, speedily reconciled himself to a marriage which was more materially advantageous than the cousinly alliance.

"I should like Rorie to have had Ashbourne," he said mournfully. "I think he would have kept up my breed of Chillingham cattle. Mallow's a good fellow, but he knows nothing about farming. He'll never spend enough money on manure to maintain the soil at its present producing power. The grasp of his mind isn't large enough to allow him to sink his money in manuring his land. He would be wanting to see an immediate result."

As time went on the Duke became more and more devoted to his farm. His Scottish castle delighted him not, nor the grand old place in the Midlands. Ashbourne, which was the pleasure-

dome he had built for himself, contained all he cared about. Too heavy and too lazy to hunt, he was able to jog about his farm, and supervise the work that was going on, to the smallest detail. There was not a foot of drain-pipe or a bit of thatch renewed on the whole estate, without the Duke having a finger in the pie. He bred fat oxen and prize cart-horses, and made a great figure at all the cattle-shows, and was happy. The Duchess, who had never believed her paragon capable of wrong-doing, had been infinitely shocked by Lady Mabel's desperate course; but it was not in her nature to be angry with that idolised daughter. She very soon came back to her original idea, that whatever Mabel Ashbourne did was right. And then the marriage was so thoroughly happy; and the world gladly forgives a scandal that ends so pleasantly.

So Lord and Lady Mallow go their way—honoured, beloved, very active in good works—and the pleasant valleys around Mallow are dotted with red brick school-houses, and the old stone hovels are giving place to model cottages, and native

industries receive all possible encouragement from the owner of the soil; and, afar off, in the coming years, the glories of Dublin Castle shine like the Pole Star that guides the wanderer on his way.

In one thing only has Lady Mallow been false to the promise of her girlhood. She has not achieved success as a poet. The Duchess wonders vaguely at this, for though she had often found it difficult to keep awake during the rehearsal of her daughter's verses, she had a fixed belief in the excellence of those efforts of genius. The secret of Lady Mallow's silence rests between her husband and herself; and it is just possible that some too candid avowal of Lord Mallow's may be the reason of her poetic sterility. It is one thing to call the lady of one's choice a tenth muse before marriage, and another thing to foster a self-delusion in one's wife which can hardly fail to become a discordant element in domestic life. "If your genius had developed, and you had won popularity as a poet, I should have lost a perfect wife," Lord Mallow told Mabel, when he wanted to put things pleasantly. "Literature has lost

a star; but I have gained the noblest and sweetest companion Providence ever bestowed upon man." Lady Mallow has not degenerated into feminine humdrum. She assists in the composition of her husband's political pamphlets, which bristle with lines from Euripides, and noble thoughts from the German poets. She writes a good many of his letters, and is altogether his second self.

While the Irishman and his wife pursue their distinguished career, Rorie and Vixen live the life they love, in the Forest where they were born, dispensing happiness within a narrow circle, but dearly loved wheresoever they are known; and the old men and women in the scattered villages round about the Abbey House rejoice in the good old times that have come again; just as hearty pleasure-loving England was glad when the stern rule of the Protector and his crop-headed saints gave place to the reign of the Merry King.

From afar there comes news of Captain Winstanley, who has married a Jewish lady at Frankfort, only daughter and heiress of a well-known money-lender. The bride is reported ugly and

illiterate; but there is no doubt as to her fortune. The Captain has bought a villa at Monaco—a villa in the midst of orange-groves, the abandoned plaything of an Austrian princess; and he has hired an apartment in one of the new avenues, just outside the Arc de Triomphe, where, as his friends anticipate, he will live in grand style, and receive the pleasantest people in Paris. He, too, is happy after his kind, and has won the twenty-thousand-pound prize in the lottery of life; but it is altogether a different kind of happiness from the simple and unalloyed delight of Rorie and Vixen, in their home among the beechen woods whose foliage sheltered them when they were children.

THE END.

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